Expanding Our Feedback Loop: Evolving the Ways We Give Feedback to Our Peers

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This paper will take a deep dive into the development of the skill of offering feedback to our human learners. As the animal field continues to improve in many aspects of animal welfare through behavior management, we often overlook the opportunities to manage each other's behavior by offering feedback to the human learners in our day-to-day interactions. By focusing on further developing our toolkit for interacting with the humans in our lives, we can better increase the overall capabilities of our teams, which in turn will increase the effectiveness of what our teams can do to better evolve the welfare of all the animals, both human and animal, in our care.

A Brief History of Feedback:

For the sake of our discussion, we will begin where feedback was classified in the physical realm of regulatory mechanisms to ensure safety, quality, and quantity. Up until the early 1800s, feedback was referred to as the action of "returning to an earlier position" within a mechanical process. Several examples of this are still prevalent today. At the gas pumps with your vehicles, there is an auto shutoff to prevent the gas from overflowing when fueling up our vehicles. On a common pressure cooker, it will shut off when its valve can't release pressure fast enough. Home thermostats regulate furnaces to sustain comfortable air temperatures. In the early 1900s, audio feedback, the painful screech we hear when a microphone is aimed towards an amplifier, had been named, bringing the current term into our dictionary. Feedback was not used in conjunction with psychological and human science theory until after 1940.

The 5 Main Worldviews of Feedback:

There are five main worldviews based on societal values and beliefs and have mainly to do with how we ought to conduct ourselves. We willingly conform to them because they help us to make sense of life and our place in the world and provide us context for understanding and working with others, even if incorrectly understood. There is a consensus thinking which makes our lives easier.

Living Systems Paradigm

Knowing life as nested wholes, each alive, each uniquely expressing and evolving its potential; focus on working developmentally and acting nodally for systemic reciprocity.

Human Potential Paradigm

A human-centered world, concerned with human needs and expression; emphasis on emotional intelligence and experimental transformation.

Behavioral Paradigm

Focus on physical existence; understanding of human behavior based on analogies with plants and animals as metaphor; nature-based recreation used as a method to relieve stress.

Machine Reductionist Paradigm

Focus on standardization, scaling up, replicability, activity cascades top to bottom, reliance on trickle-down effects.

Royalty and Elite Paradigm

Elitism, a select few born or bred to lead others in war, government, and religion.

It is found that the Behavioral and Machine Reductionist paradigms are the most common seen in the workforce today.

6 Main Types of Feedback:

Formal Feedback

This type of feedback is appropriate for planned meetings that you specifically designate for feedback, like quarterly reviews. Both sides should know the conversation topics and come prepared with thoughts and questions.

Informal Feedback

Informal feedback can range from offering kudos on a job well done to making a quick edit on a project. This type of feedback is trickier because it can be spontaneous, son consider your setting before giving informal feedback. A good example of this setting scenario would be offering harder to hear feedback in a "high traffic area" where the conversation might begin as a private one, but if other people join in the area, it will move into the realm of a public setting very quickly. Remember you can always say, "Let's pause this for a second and step away to a more removed location!"

Positive Feedback

You should ensure you are praising team members for impressive work. By doing so, you'll remind your teams that you notice both the positives and the negatives they are bringing. In my experience, in this world and the way the workforce is setup, this is one of the most important, yet lesser utilized, forms of feedback. When working with animals, we often are hyper focused on subtle changes we want to reinforce, but sometimes, we forget this with the human learners in our lives.

Encouragement Feedback

Like positive feedback, you can use encouragement feedback to give your team mate a pick-me-up. Have they been working through a difficult project or seem a little burned out? Remind them of their value and how appreciated they are. The key to this type of feedback is to be specific to add value to this. If you are not specific, it can become white noise. An example of this:

SCENARIO 1: Thanks! I appreciate you!

Or

SCENARIO 2: Thanks! I appreciated that you washed out those crates that allowed me to have the extra time to focus on that special project I had been wanting to complete!

Forward Feedback

This type of feedback focuses on future solutions rather than past corrections. This type of feedback is more of a proactive approach for improvement based on past observations. For example, if a team member is struggling with time management, you might want to recommend a calendar organization tool rather than dwelling on their current lateness. This doesn't disregard their lateness, but instead gives a focus on how to succeed in the desired behavior.

Constructive Feedback

Constructive criticism is the best type of feedback for helping team members to grow. Offering constructive criticism involves analyzing a situation, identifying an opportunity for improvement, and providing a detailed recommendation on how to improve.

Steps to Giving Effective Feedback

Choose the Right Time

Ask your team members when they like to get feedback. Do they like to get feedback immediately? Would they rather meet late in the week to discuss ongoing projects? Strive for a healthy balance of face-to-face and asynchronous-or offline-communication. You might think face-to-face is always better, but some team members prefer to see feedback in writing first, and then talk about it. Ask team members if they have a preference and how you can create a positive feedback experience for them.

Use the Correct Type of Feedback

Different scenarios call for different types of feedback, and you need to recognize what type is the most appropriate for the situation. Not every type of feedback is relevant or even appropriate for you to give. If you're leading a team, but not actually managing the people you work with, you may want to stay clear of some heavier types of feedback, like performance evaluations.

Be Direct

Being direct doesn't mean being harsh. You should approach feedback in an honest, but kind way. It shows you're invested in helping your team members to grow. During this process, avoid the "feedback sandwich". This is where you shove constructive criticism between statements of praise. When offering direct feedback, use examples and share your feedback in "I" statements. This will help

you to focus on specific details and how you perceived them, so your team member can focus on identifying and implementing solutions to the feedback.

Give Specific Recommendations for Improvement

Giving recommendations is truly what makes the criticism constructive instead of destructive. The best kind of feedback is actionable, meaning that you give the team member a recommendation that is applicable for future endeavors. The "why" in a project is key to success for learning. For example, if you are reviewing an email that a team member is about to send and you recommend changing some wording or language, be sure to explain the reason you would structure the email a certain way or why you would avoid certain words.

Encourage Upward Feedback

You should always open the floor for questions after giving feedback. Don't be afraid to ask questions like: Was my feedback helpful? Is there anything else I can provide in future feedback? Is there a specific way you prefer to get feedback in the future? Remember to check with team members regularly to see if you can improve how you give feedback.

Follow up with a Recap

A recap will help both you and the team member digest information better. Rehash what was said, if there were actionable items for either party involved, and make sure that is how your team member heard it. If not, continue the conversation for clarity.

Encourage Continuous Feedback

Over time, this should feel like a collaboration between yourself and your team. Whenever you meet with individual team members, ask questions about what's on their plate or if any projects and things have been particularly challenging. These questions will help you understand if your team members are overloaded with work or could benefit from more internal training. Asking these questions will give you insights into your team's happiness and productivity.

Mentorship

One of the things we implemented at NEI was a mentorship program. In its earliest stages, we wanted there to be upward accountability so that all levels of staff could practice skills to become better leaders. Trainers had Senior I Trainers as mentors. Senior I Trainers were coached by Senior II Trainers. Supervisors coached the Senior IIs. The Managers coached the Supervisors. Over time, we have learned more and understand not everyone put into a Senior role should necessarily have leadership as a sole focus. With that as the case, not every Senior Trainer going through our programs should be expected to become a mentor. People evolve and they could ultimately decide that is a passion they wish to pursue, but to blankly expect that is a given from an individual could lead to failure on both the teacher and learner. It is because of this that we take a close look before anyone of our staff becomes a mentor

to other staff. This allows us to best prepare those individuals and the people they will be working with to succeed.

Goal Setting

Goal setting should be part of any feedback or evaluation process. This should include both short- and long-term goals. It is important to operationalize what those goals are, why the person is interested in that as a goal, what they might need to successfully reach those goals, how personal goals might or might not line up with the needs of the organization at that time, and what success would ultimately look like in achieving those goals.

Exercises for Feedback Delivery

There are many exercises that can help an individual or a team prepare to better offer feedback.

- *Find the Ball*

  - Instructions:

    - Step 1. Ask for 4 volunteers to leave the room. Let them know they will be asked to come back into the room one by one. Write each person's name on a separate sheet of paper. (We will use name badges)

    - Step 2. Provide the remaining team, a.k.a "coaches" with these instructions:

      - The 4 who left the room will be asked to come back into the room one at a time, complete their mission, then leave the room again. The goal is for them to find the ball within the room, which the remaining team will hide. Each ball seeker will be provided different levels of feedback by the coaches:

      - Volunteer #1 = Silent Feedback

      - Volunteer #2 = Negative Feedback

      - Volunteer #3 = Positive Feedback

      - Volunteer #4 = Specific Feedback

    - Step 3. Ask the coaches to decide which volunteer will receive each type of feedback. Be mindful about which volunteer is to receive negative feedback. Although this is an exercise, it still might be upsetting to certain individuals.

    - Step 4. Have a coach hide the ball somewhere in the room. Then invite volunteer #1 back to find the ball. Allow each volunteer 3 minutes to search while the coaches provide feedback based on the instructions provided in step

2. Have the volunteer leave the room after their time is up. Repeat this step for volunteers #2, #3, and #4.

- Step 5. All volunteers and coaches will come back together for the volunteers to discuss the following questions:

  - How did you feel while looking for the ball?

  - What did you think/feel as a result of the feedback you received?

  - How did the feedback you received affect your performance?

  - What did the feedback you received prompt you to think/feel about the other folk in the room who were giving it?

  - If this was the type of feedback that you received every day, how do you think it would impact your desire and/or ability to keep yourself and your teammates safe?

Clean Sweep

- Teach Someone How to Sweep the Floor the Way you would like it Done.

  - Step 1: Teach How you See fit

  - Step 2: Have the Learner Attempt this Skill

  - Step 3: Have a quick talkdown about that session

  - Step 4: As a group, discuss what worked well or what could be improvement opportunities in the talkdown.

A Stagnant Environment

- Scenario: One person in the group feels they are not progressing at the speed with which they should be.

  - Step 1: Approach from a co-worker to co-worker

  - Step 2: Approach from a mentor to mentee

  - Step 3: Approach from a Leader to Staff person

  - Step 4: As a group, discuss each of those interactions and what you liked or felt could be improved upon.

Conclusion

Ultimately, there are many ways and resources we can utilize to better develop our skills of both giving and receiving feedback. Our ultimate goal should be to continue to push the communication barriers forward so that we ultimately can best achieve success with all of the learners in our lives, both human and non.

Resources

- Asana (June 13, 2022). *How to give effective project feedback in 7 steps. https://asana.com/resources/project-feedback*

- Sanford, Carol. 2019. "No More Feedback: Cultivate Consciousness at Work", Chapter 5. Interoctave.

- Wang, Julie (2022). *Your Team Can Power Through With These 6 Feedback Exercises.* Manage Better. *https://managebetter.com/blog/try-these-feedback-exercises-with-your-team*