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# Actionable feedback: Unlocking the power of learning and performance improvement

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## Executive Overview

*Delivering critical feedback can be brutal for everyone involved. Most managers hate giving critical feedback, and most employees detest receiving it. In addition, critical feedback often fails to produce the desired results. We describe how cognitive and emotional dynamics—how we think and feel while giving and receiving feedback—can complicate this process, making it more painful and less useful than it should be. These dynamics often interfere with the ability of recipients to process and respond constructively to feedback. They also interfere with the ability of feedback givers to formulate and deliver feedback that is high quality and does not produce defensiveness. Further complicating matters, both feedback givers and receivers have a difficult time recognizing how their own cognitive and emotional dynamics are hindering their effectiveness in the feedback process. We illustrate how these dynamics hamper the feedback giving and receiving process and how understanding them can help managers produce more actionable feedback on performance (feedback that leads to learning and appropriate results).*

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## Critical Feedback

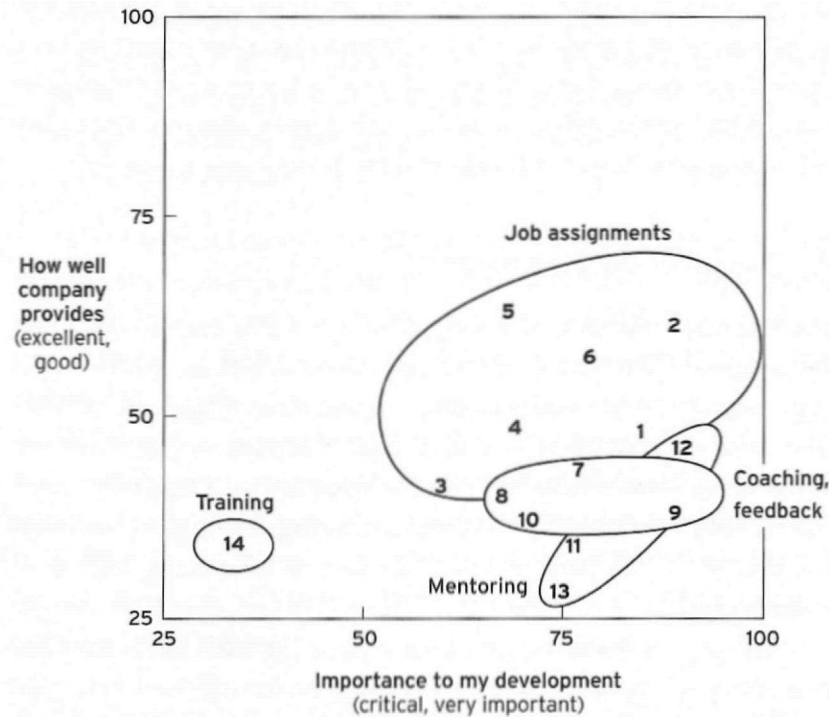
It's no secret that most people dislike giving critical feedback.<sup>1</sup> To compound the problem, delivery of critical feedback frequently fails to lead to a desirable change in the recipient's behavior.<sup>2</sup> In addition, recipients of critical feedback sometimes retain hostile feelings towards the givers for years after the fact and may even lash out at them.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, because assimilation of accurate feedback is crucial to employee learning and development,<sup>4</sup> managers are charged with the responsibility of providing it. In an effort to assist managers with this challenging task, we will explore what makes feedback-giving so difficult and what can be done to make it less painful and more useful.

More specifically, we will describe the cognitive and emotional dynamics—how we think and feel—that interfere with the quality of feedback giving and receiving. We will also explore how understanding these dynamics can help managers produce more actionable feedback. By "actionable feedback" we mean feedback that produces both

learning and tangible, appropriate results, such as increasing effectiveness and improving performance on the job. When we say "managers," we are referring mainly to an employee's direct boss, but also to other key parties (including one's other superiors, peers, and subordinates) who may provide support and feedback to that employee over time.

## *The Impact of Feedback on Learning and Development*

The importance of feedback for learning and improvement has long been recognized by psychologists.<sup>5</sup> A McKinsey & Company survey of over 12,000 managers throughout the world also supports this recognition (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> As Figure 1 illustrates, managers consider "candid, insightful feedback" extremely important to their development, but most do not believe their companies do a good job of providing such feedback. This finding parallels our experience in coaching a wide range of people who commonly complain that they get little guidance or feedback on their work.



**JOB ASSIGNMENTS**

- 1 Promote high performers quickly
- 2 Build skills to boost career prospects
- 3 Fast rotation and advancement
- 4 Roles with P & L responsibility
- 5 Special project opportunities
- 6 On-the-job training

**COACHING, FEEDBACK**

- 7 Told my strengths and weaknesses
- 8 360° feedback

- 9 Candid, insightful feedback

- 10 Informal coaching from boss

**MENTORING**

- 11 Great mentor
- 12 Great senior role models
- 13 Mentoring advice on development

**TRAINING**

- 14 Traditional classroom training

Source: McKinsey & Company's War for Talent 2000 Survey

**Figure 1**  
**Factors that Drive Development**

Talented people depend on others for honest assessments of their work in determining what to do better. Without feedback about their performance, they have a hard time figuring out how to improve.<sup>7</sup> With constructive feedback, they can learn sooner and with much greater specificity. Also, as talented people make efforts to improve themselves, objective observers can help them understand whether their efforts are on track or not and how they might be improved.

Thus, feedback can be highly useful. However,

despite its potential benefits, a review of studies on feedback by Kluger and DeNisi showed only a modest positive relationship between feedback and performance; in fact, in 38 percent of the cases studied, feedback actually had a negative impact on performance.<sup>8</sup>

**Cognitive and Emotional Dynamics**

Our focus in this article is on the cognitive and emotional dynamics or challenges that make giv-

ing and receiving feedback so difficult and that prevent feedback interventions from achieving their potential benefits. In contrast to many other managerial responsibilities, giving and receiving feedback can be very personal and can be charged with high levels of emotion for both giver and receiver. However, traditional management education has focused more on analytical tools and skills<sup>9</sup> that are not well matched to the psychological aspects of giving feedback. Thus, many managers are uncomfortable with the high levels of emotion that can be involved in the process. In addition, people sometimes react to feedback in unpredictable, even volatile ways. Recipients have been known to become angry, cry, storm out of the office, lash out verbally, physically attack, and even in very rare instances to kill the manager.<sup>10</sup> Attacking the manager may be unusual, but a common outcome is that delivering feedback, especially critical feedback, produces strong emotional reactions that may hinder learning and development.

In addition to emotion, cognitive processes of both managers and subordinates can contribute to difficulties in giving and receiving feedback. Managers and subordinates often have very different ways of evaluating and making sense of behavior.<sup>11</sup> Thus, they may find themselves in significant disagreement regarding performance ratings and feedback. Given these cognitive and emotional dynamics, managers who wish to deliver actionable feedback would be wise to understand them and how to deal with them constructively.

As we explain below, the roles of feedback giver and feedback receiver each evoke their own set of cognitive and emotional processes that may interfere with learning and development. First, we will examine some of the cognitive and emotional dynamics associated with the receiving role. This will provide an understanding of the potential difficulties managers face in approaching subordinates. Second, we will examine several feedback statements that were given by managers, and we will illustrate their counterproductive characteristics. Third, we will describe the cognitive and emotional dynamics that affect feedback givers and that lead them to produce such nonactionable feedback. Finally, we will illustrate how understanding the dynamics associated with feedback giving and receiving can be used to help managers produce more actionable feedback.

### ***Cognitive and Emotional Dynamics Impacting Feedback Receivers***

Although it is common knowledge that receiving critical feedback is unpleasant, the potential cog-

nitive and emotional complications associated with receiving feedback transcend mere unpleasantness.

A lengthy history of psychological research demonstrates that people tend not to view themselves accurately, and they are not good at accurately perceiving how others are seeing them.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, they see themselves more positively than others see them; thus, critical feedback is likely to appear inaccurate, and receivers are likely to disagree with it.

Attributional biases or errors affect both managers and subordinates and can lead them to form conflicting views. For example, most people have a "self-serving bias,"<sup>13</sup> which means that in assessing our own work we tend to see ourselves as responsible for successes, and blame failures on others or external forces. By contrast, managers, who are in the observer role, experience an "actor/observer bias"<sup>14</sup> and are more likely to attribute failures to internal causes (the subordinates themselves), to discount subordinate successes, and to find subordinate performance lacking.<sup>15</sup>

Further complicating matters, inaccurate positive self-perceptions (positive illusions) may be more than just self-indulgent flights of fancy. Shelly Taylor, et al. have argued that positive illusions are a hallmark of mental health and are crucial to enabling people to avoid depression and maintain the self-esteem, confidence, and optimism that keep them motivated, persistent, and productive.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Bandura has demonstrated that high perceived self-efficacy enhances performance on a variety of tasks, and he has argued that seeing yourself as more capable than you really are enhances your performance more than accurate self-perceptions.<sup>17</sup> Thus, subordinates may resist feedback not only because feedback seems inaccurate, but because accepting critiques could undermine their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Furthermore, depending on the content and delivery of feedback, it may be received as a personal attack, threatening one's ego or identity.<sup>18</sup> This may provoke deeper psychological fears for the receiver around questions such as "Am I worthwhile?" "Am I likable?" "Am I capable?" etc. In such cases, receivers can experience a strong "fight or flight" emotional reaction.

In addition, feeling attacked or threatened tends to create stress that hinders learning. Research suggests that a common reaction to stress or the experience of threat is to circle the emotional wagons and defend oneself. This response is characterized by increased rigidity, a restriction in information processing, and a constriction of control.<sup>19</sup>

All of these can interfere with a person's ability to learn and respond constructively to feedback.

In sum, a variety of cognitive and emotional dynamics can interfere with the receiver's ability to process, learn from, and respond constructively to feedback. Thus, managers should consider these complications and craft their feedback carefully in order to avoid inadvertently causing the receiver to feel unfairly attacked or misperceived.

Cognitive and emotional dynamics also influence the feedback-giving role and can lead feedback givers to produce poor quality feedback that provokes a counterproductive, defensive reaction. Next, we will examine feedback statements that were given by managers in order to illustrate the characteristics that limit their actionability. Following that, we will describe the cognitive and emotional dynamics that lead managers to produce such poor quality feedback.

### Flawed Feedback

All too often, performance feedback is not useful for its intended purpose. For example, the nonactionable feedback statements below were made by senior managers from organizations large and small. Typically, this feedback was provided to the authors (in our capacity as executive coaches) as part of an interview 360-degree process, to then share with our clients as a part of their 360-degree feedback.

- We just can't trust Bill.
- Pat does not stand firm.
- Jane is not a team player and is contentious.
- Phil is a poor manager.
- Lane is unprofessional.
- Jerry is not committed.
- Ted adds no value.

Most of these initial feedback statements were made as we interviewed a full circle of parties (superiors, peers, subordinates, and sometimes customers), in a series of individual key person interviews. We usually started with a common set of questions that addressed areas such as strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvements, with ample opportunity for other comments. We then planned to debrief our clients from these interviews in a facilitated feedback session, designed to help them understand the data and plan the next steps.

Clients could conduct these interviews themselves, but often choose not to due to the time demands, their lack of skill, or the desire to take advantage of the neutrality that a third party can provide. If threatening issues are involved, a

skilled third party, who has established rapport and assurances that confidences will be maintained, may create an environment in which less filtering takes place and more valid data is produced. However, although the role of third party may have particular advantages, the insights in this article are designed to help enhance the ability of individuals to function in any of the three roles of feedback giver, feedback receiver, or third party.

When the managers provided the feedback above, they perceived it as accurate and useful. However, we will next illustrate several shared counterproductive features of these feedback statements that limit their usefulness.

### *1. Attacks the Person Rather Than the Person's Behavior*

This feedback is likely to be taken as a personal attack by the receiver because it criticizes the person or the person's character rather than addressing the behavior that is problematic. The feedback giver's attribution appears to be internal (assigning blame to the person rather than the situation) and stable (consistent across situations). Receivers often experience this kind of feedback as sending the message: "You are a fundamentally flawed, bad, or useless person, and that is just your nature." Such feedback tends to provoke a strong defensive emotional reaction.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to provoking an immediate defensive reaction, feedback that focuses the receiver's attention on the "self" rather than the task or task learning tends to have a negative effect on subsequent performance.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, this kind of internal, stable formulation may be experienced by the receivers as suggesting that they are not capable of change, and this can be discouraging to the receiver.

An alternative style of formulating the feedback may be equally if not more accurate and is likely to result in a more productive outcome. A typical feedback formulation might be something like "You are sloppy." Alternatively, the feedback could be formulated along the following line: "I believe an alternative way of handling this situation would lead to better results." By beginning the message with "I" rather than "you," the focus is less on blaming the other and more on helping the receiver understand the perceptions of the feedback giver. This format also focuses attention on the task and on an opportunity for producing better results. This is also more likely to lead to a constructive dialogue.



## **2. Vague or Abstract Assertions**

Although we may get the general picture of the problem, the feedback above is rather vague or abstract and could be interpreted in many different ways. For example, when the statement "We can't trust Bill" is made, we do not know whether it means: 1) that Bill is suspected of stealing from the company; or 2) that he acts on self-interest instead of the interest of the company; or 3) that he is well-intentioned but not sufficiently skilled to deliver on his commitments. Each of these interpretations could have very different implications.

This vagueness makes the feedback difficult to interpret correctly. It also may encourage defensiveness because the fact that it is difficult to interpret may lead the receiver to see it as inaccurate and falsely accusational.

## **3. Without Illustrations**

This feedback is also stated without illustrations or examples of what specific things these individuals do that leads the feedback givers to see them this way. Illustrations or examples may be essential for enabling the recipients to make a concrete connection with what the feedback giver is talking about. Illustrations and examples make the feedback more understandable and may also help to clarify what the implications for action might be.

## **4. Ill-Defined Range of Application**

Another limitation is that the feedback is global, without any clarification about the conditions under which the problematic behavior does or does not exhibit itself. We do not know whether this problematic behavior is exhibited almost all the time in almost all situations or whether it is only exhibited under certain conditions. Also, if it is the latter, there is no specificity or clarification as to the conditions under which it is exhibited and those under which it is not exhibited. For example, in the feedback above when Lane is described as "unprofessional," we do know whether the feedback giver finds Lane unprofessional in virtually everything he says and does, or just in some particular area. The behavior of concern might exhibit itself only when making presentations to new employees, when dealing with a particular member of the office staff, or with how raggedly he dresses on casual Fridays. Without more specificity, the receiver does not get a clear picture of the target area of the feedback or of what needs to be changed and what can be left as it is. These types of global or blanket statements often

produce defensiveness because, if the recipients can think of even one situation to which the feedback does not apply, they may feel justified in seeing the feedback as inaccurate and in seeing themselves as being unfairly attacked.

## **5. Unclear Impact and Implications for Action**

Not only are we missing specific examples of what the person does, we also have no clarity on what the feedback giver sees as the impact of this behavior and why it is problematic. Therefore, we have little sense of what allegedly dysfunctional consequences are being produced, why this is important, and what should be done to fix the problem. The feedback is not accompanied by indications of what specific behavioral changes are desired from these recipients. Therefore, the recipients may have difficulty inferring from this feedback what is desired of them and how they can rectify the situation.

In sum, these feedback examples have a number of characteristics that limit their actionability. Ironically, even experienced managers commonly produce feedback that is given with intent of being helpful that has these same general characteristics. Each of the feedback givers in the cases above observed the receiver's behavior over a considerable period of time and had many interactions on which to base their conclusions. Thus, each giver should have been able to give multiple illustrations of the behavior that was of concern and that led to their conclusion. Instead, they merely stated their conclusions in a way that was not particularly helpful to learning or action. What leads even successful, experienced, highly educated, and highly motivated managers to provide feedback with so many limitations?

## **Cognitive and Emotional Dynamics Impacting Feedback Givers**

Not only do cognitive and emotional dynamics lead people to produce poor quality feedback, they also interfere with our ability to assess the quality of our own feedback. Therefore, managers have a hard time knowing what to do differently to make their feedback more actionable.

### **1. Inference-Making Limitations**

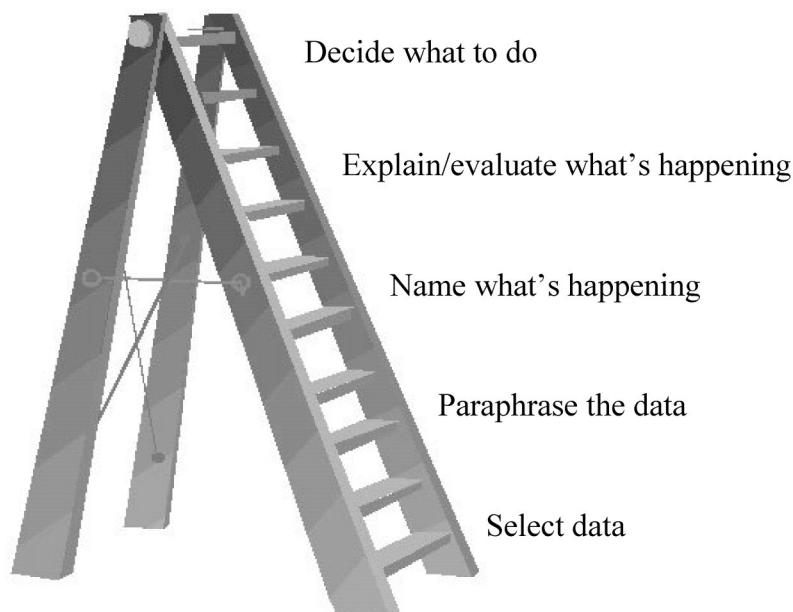
An understanding of human inference-making and sense-making should begin with the recognition that people are constantly flooded with informa-

tion from their five senses. Attending to and processing all the information would be overwhelming. Instead, people have learned to be selective about where they focus their attention. So, without even having consciously to attend to this process, our minds naturally select observations or bits of information on which to focus, and we make interpretations of what these mean. This happens so quickly and so automatically that we are usually unaware that we are even doing it. Argyris provided a helpful metaphor for this process, which he calls the ladder of inference.<sup>22</sup> Figure 2 depicts Argyris' ladder of inference with a few additional refinements that were made by McArthur, Putnam, and Smith of Action Design.<sup>23</sup> In making inferences, people start with objective data and observations and then move up the ladder as they select what data to focus on and how to interpret it. Figure 3 illustrates how very different interpretations can be made from the same data. In this case, Ellen had been conducting performance appraisals; and her boss made the following statement: "Performance appraisals aren't easy. Giving honest feedback as a part of performance appraisal is really important. Of course, you still have to be somewhat diplomatic with people nowadays." Depending on where she focused her attention and what assumptions she made, she could just as easily come to either of two opposite conclusions ("I need to be more sensitive next time" or "I need to be

tougher next time") that are listed at the top of the ladder.

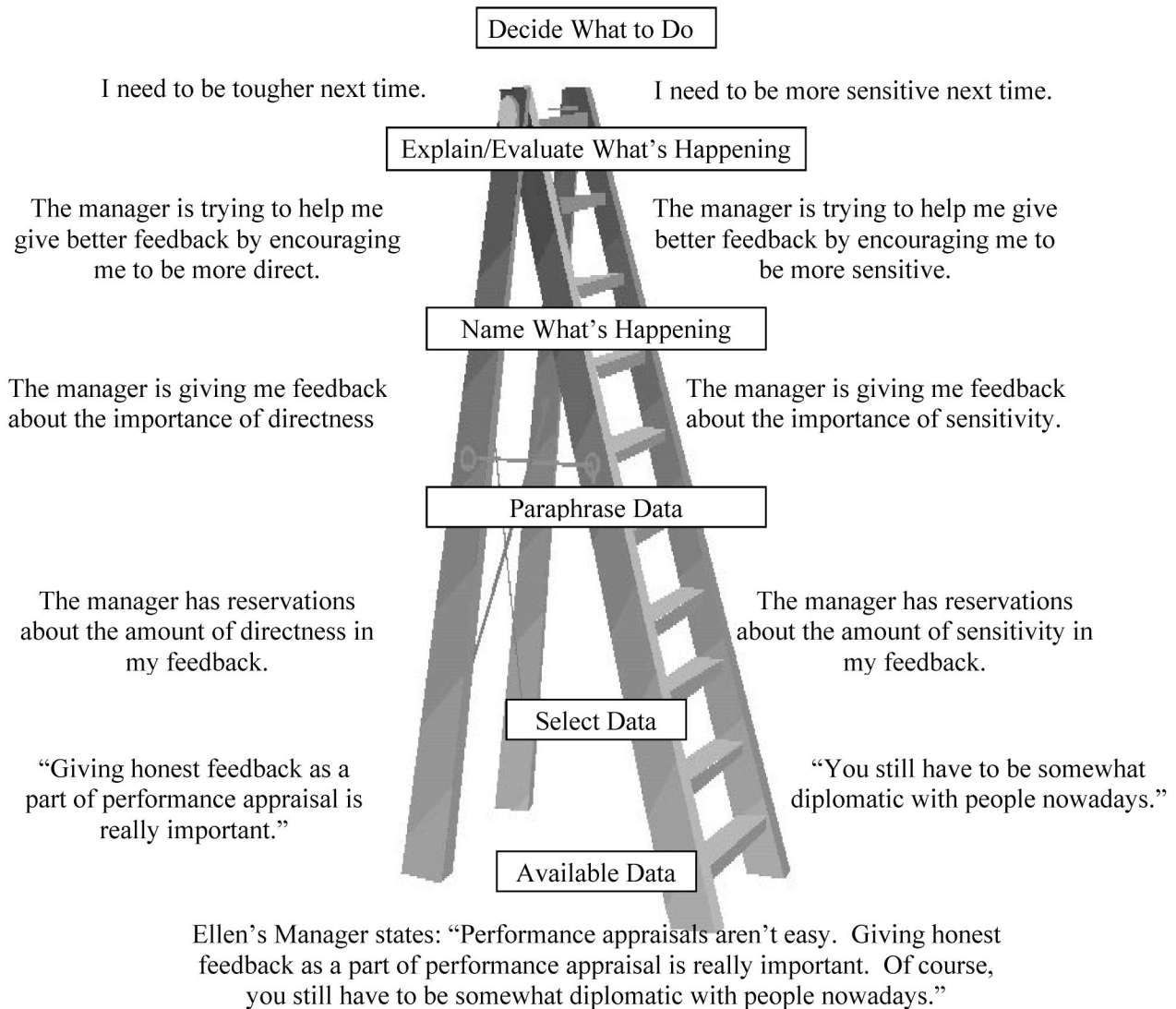
## 2. Attributional Biases

When making inferences about other people's behavior, a number of attributional biases or errors may be in operation.<sup>24</sup> As was mentioned above with the "actor/observer bias," managers are typically biased toward making internal (personal vs. situational) attributions, and this increases the likelihood that the feedback will come across as a personal attack.<sup>25</sup> Further, if the manager's attributions focus on a stable cause, such as lack of ability or a personality trait, the feedback may leave the receiver feeling discouraged about the prospects for change. Another attributional bias, the "false-consensus bias," suggests that people overestimate the likelihood that others will see things the same way they do.<sup>26</sup> Thus, managers are likely both to make overly critical or blaming internal attributions and to fail to recognize that others may not agree with these attributions. Failure to recognize the gap between our conclusions and others' conclusions, when combined with the human tendency to be overconfident in the accuracy of our own conclusions, reduces the feedback giver's ability to see the need to provide more concrete, useful information to the receiver.



### Available Data

Figure 2  
Ladder of Inference



**Figure 3**  
**Ladder of Inference Example: Ellen's Feedback**

### 3. Overconfidence

Inference-making is a natural process that people use minute-by-minute in their daily lives, and it tends to serve people fairly well—it enables people quickly to assess situations and decide how to handle them. This might not be so problematic if it were not for human overconfidence. The observation that people tend to be overconfident in the accuracy of their perceptions is a very robust finding in the psychological literature.<sup>27</sup> Its relevance here is that people tend to forget that their conclusions about other people are not cold, hard facts, but are actually inferences made using the imperfect lens of subjectively filtered information with possible biases and misinterpretations. Instead, people often make little distinction between their own perceptions and reality. Accord-

ingly, we tend to expect others to see things the same way we do. Consistent with the "false-consensus bias" mentioned above, it is as if people are thinking "If it is obvious to me, it should be obvious to them too."

Because people think that their perceptions of others are obviously correct, they often do not feel the need to explain or illustrate how they arrived at their negative conclusions. Feedback givers tend to forget that they may be missing something as a result of incomplete data, misinterpretation, or relying on a faulty assumption. Thus, the inference making process (as illustrated by the ladder of inference), bias, and overconfidence create gaps in perception that lead feedback givers to produce poor quality feedback and to be unable to see what is wrong with their own feedback.

#### 4. *Third-Party Perspective Differences*

As Chris Argyris has demonstrated, a person's involvement in designing feedback influences his or her ability to assess its quality.<sup>28</sup> When people design feedback they tend not to see the flaws in the feedback that they personally developed. However, when they are observing the feedback given by someone else, they are able more easily to recognize its limitations. For example, the limitations of the feedback above are not difficult for others to see. In fact, each individual who gave the above feedback might be able to look at the feedback the others gave and recognize its limitations. However, when they look at their own feedback, they tend to have a difficult time seeing those same limitations. People see their conclusions as obvious and self-evident, and they expect others to see things the same way. By contrast, a more neutral observer can often view the situation more objectively and can readily identify the limitations in the feedback that the feedback giver is constructing. This difficulty in seeing the limitations of our own feedback is a key reason why managers produce poor-quality feedback.

As a result of the inference-making limitations, attributional biases, overconfidence, and third-party perspective differences described above, feedback givers tend to be insufficiently aware of how large a gap may exist between their perceptions and those of the receiver. Thus, feedback givers tend not to prepare sufficiently to play the role of educator when giving feedback. We tend not to ask the question: "What examples, evidence, or data will the other person need in order to make an informed judgment as to the accuracy of my assertion?" Instead, although managers recognize that the recipient will not want to hear critical feedback, they tend to expect that, once they get past the initial upset, the nature of the problem and the solution should be somewhat self-evident to the recipient.<sup>29</sup> By contrast, in many critical feedback situations, people have sharply different perceptions about the status quo, the desirable alternative, and what should be done to get there.<sup>30</sup>

#### 5. *Strong Emotions Can Impact Ratings and Feedback Formulation and Delivery*

Although emotions may be most intense for those receiving feedback, they can also be strong and influential for those giving feedback.<sup>31</sup> The feedback givers' emotions can influence performance ratings, formulation of feedback, and delivery of feedback. Any of these can affect how the receiver responds to the feedback. Emotions that affect the

feedback giving process could potentially come from many possible sources.<sup>32</sup> For example, managers have their own unrelated personal problems and stresses. Irritation may be exacerbated by their personal anxieties about giving feedback and the frustration that has built up because they waited too long to address the problem. Managers may be affected by their working relationship and working history with the subordinate,<sup>33</sup> their dependence on the subordinate, the subordinate's past performance, and their attributions regarding subordinate performance.<sup>34</sup>

Interpersonal affect, and to a lesser extent mood, have been shown to affect performance ratings.<sup>35</sup> The way that managers make sense of subordinate shortcomings can also affect feedback. Managers are more likely to be punitive when they make internal (personal vs. situational) attributions as to their subordinates' shortcomings.<sup>36</sup> Manager feedback can also be influenced by whether they believe the subordinate's behavior has impacted them. Managers who believe both that they have been affected negatively by a subordinate and that the cause was lack of effort provide feedback that is more punitive than it would be otherwise.<sup>37</sup>

Occasionally, managers let their emotions get the best of them and spontaneously lash out at a subordinate. Feedback that is delivered merely as a by-product of a manager letting off steam is unlikely to generate a constructive response. Feedback tends to be most helpful when it is given with the intent of development,<sup>38</sup> and the way feedback is crafted or delivered might affect the way the receiver perceives the giver's intent. When feedback givers make clear that their intent is to develop employees and coaching is provided to support that development, employees are especially likely to use feedback to achieve performance gains.<sup>39</sup>

Other managers are aware that subordinates can react strongly to feedback and may even use that knowledge to provoke a response. For example, researchers have found that accuracy is not always a primary goal of the appraisal, and some managers have deliberately distorted ratings in a negative direction with the intention of "shocking" the subordinate into better performance or of teaching a subordinate a "lesson."<sup>40</sup> Such feedback might make a point, but would not necessarily be constructive.<sup>41</sup>

In sum, strong feelings from a variety of causes may be another factor contributing to the poor quality and harshness of the feedback above. Next, we will turn our attention to illustrating how an understanding of these cognitive and emotional



dynamics can be used to produce feedback that is more actionable.

### Producing Actionable Feedback

One useful leverage point for improving feedback involves drawing on the strengths of a third-party described above. Specifically, the perception gaps that inhibit our ability to see the problems with our own feedback tend not to inhibit our ability to see the problems with feedback given by others, provided we are in a dispassionate observer role. A third-party perspective and an understanding of the ladder of inference can be extremely helpful in assisting a feedback giver in designing more actionable feedback.

To illustrate how this works, we draw on data from our own coaching experience. As noted above, we prefer to gather 360-degree feedback through key person interviews. One reason is that we have found that written comments (or "verbatim") in response to 360-degree survey instruments are often not very actionable. Similarly, the initial feedback statement in an interview is often of poor quality as discussed above. However, the interview format enables us to ask questions that help the feedback giver to produce more specific, valid data and thus produce more actionable feedback for the receiver. In particular, we use our third-party perspective and our understanding of the ladder of inference to help feedback givers recall and clarify the data, observations, examples, or experiences upon which they based their conclusions about the receiver.

The first three feedback statements in bullet-points above ("We just can't trust Bill," "Pat does not stand firm," and "Jane is not a team player and is contentious") are examples of the initial feedback that was given in key person interviews. Now, we will illustrate how a third-party perspective can be used to assist the feedback giver in moving down the ladder of inference in order to produce more actionable feedback.

In the next section, we share more of the context of each case, the questions that we asked the feedback givers in order to assist them in giving more actionable feedback, and the eventual feedback that was reported. We have found that a useful way to begin is simply to ask the feedback givers to share some specific examples of what leads them to see the receiver the way they do. This helps the feedback givers to move down the ladder of inference. We also believe that these questions help to reduce the feedback giver's overconfidence, attributional bias, and irritation toward the receiver.

### Case #1: "We just can't trust Bill"

**Context:** The owner of an entrepreneurial business expressed concerns about Bill's (Chief Operations Officer) trustworthiness. As the owner was questioned, more clarity emerged about how he perceived Bill as a roadblock to new ventures.

#### Dialogue

Owner: We just can't trust Bill.

Coach: Can you give an example of what Bill does that leads you to conclude that you cannot trust him?

Owner: He is constantly criticizing.

Coach: Can you give me some examples?

Owner: In our meeting last week, we discussed two new ventures. He was overly critical, raising all potential problems he could think of and did not say anything to acknowledge the importance of growing through new ventures.

Coach: Are there other examples of being overly critical other than with new ventures?

Owner: Well, actually he is just fine on the day-to-day operations. It is really just on the new ventures, but the new ventures are really important to our company.

Coach: OK, and can you clarify how you would like him to behave if he believes he sees a legitimate problem with an idea?

Owner: Well, his technical skills are good, and we do want his critiques, but we also want to know what strengths he sees and what it would take for him to put his full support behind an idea.

Eventually the feedback was reported as follows: When it comes to new ventures, the owner sees you raising a number of reservations, but not sharing what you see as strengths or clarifying the conditions under which you could fully support a new idea. For example, . . . Therefore, he is not clear whether there are any conditions under which you would support a new idea. In the future, he would like you to share your thoughts on both the assets and the liabilities of new ideas. He would also like you to clarify the conditions under which you would be willing to support a new venture.

The initial feedback was abstract and would likely have been resented by Bill because saying someone cannot be trusted is a very serious charge and may have been experienced as a personal attack on his character. However, asking the owner for specific examples helped to lead him down the

ladder of inference and enabled him to make his feedback more actionable.

### Case #2: "Pat does not stand firm."

**Context:** Pat, a Senior Vice President and the director of financial reporting in a *Fortune* 50 company, had been successful but had not advanced recently, and it did not appear that he was being groomed for further advancement. In short, his career seemed stalled. Therefore, Pat initiated the 360-degree evaluation in order to explore what might be blocking his advancement and what, if anything, he could do about it. The pivotal key person interview took place with the corporate Vice Chairman, who oversaw the finance and risk management function and served as Pat's 3-up boss (Pat reported to the comptroller, who reported to the CFO, who reported to the Vice Chairman).

### Dialogue

Vice Chairman: Pat does not stand firm.

Coach: I get the general idea. What would be an example of not standing firm?

Vice Chairman: Well, that is hard to say, but let me illustrate. When Pat's boss comes in to review our 4<sup>th</sup> quarter earnings release, we may have ideas about how to goose up the numbers a little and make things look a little better for the quarter. Many of these ideas might be perfectly fine, but if any of them were ever to stretch into a grey area, we would have to count on the comptroller to say, "That is going too far, and I will not sign that." I fear that Pat would not stand firm against the ideas of top management the way his boss does.

Coach: What leads you to see him this way?

Vice Chairman: Well, he is affable, amiable, and anxious to please and does not have sharp elbows.

Coach: OK, I can see how you would wonder about him. However, I still am not getting a clear picture. Is this a demonstrated weakness or just an untested skill? Can you think of anything Pat has done that leads you to conclude that this is a demonstrated weakness?

Vice Chairman: (Pauses to contemplate for moment, then shakes his head no.) That is a good distinction. I think it is an untested skill.

Coach: OK, so you believe it is an untested skill. Do you have ideas about how you could test it?

Vice Chairman: No, not for now.

Coach: OK, let's continue the interview . . .

Vice Chairman: (About five minutes later he interrupts his own train of thought) Wait, I have

an idea how we can test it. We will give Pat a job which demands that he demonstrate those skills!

Coach: Great, what job would that be?

Vice Chairman: Well, I'm not sure specifically now, but we should probably shift Pat to a CFO function for one of our big businesses to create a fair test.

The surprise outcome in this case was that the Vice Chairman, upon further reflection, realized that Pat had never actually been tested, and he decided to give Pat the opportunity to prove himself. The questions clarified why the Vice Chairman was concerned about Pat, but also clarified that Pat had never actually exhibited the quality that he was perceived as having. Our goal was not to advocate a point of view. We were only trying to gather valid data. However, this case illustrates what a powerful impact a few questions can have on the feedback giver's overconfidence.

This dialogue was shared with Pat, and a few months later he was offered a new position and accepted it. The expectations for the new position were made clear, and Pat had an opportunity to prove himself. Since then, Pat made a successful transition to the new position, as described elsewhere.<sup>42</sup>

### Case #3: "Jane is not a team player and is contentious."

We will share a final case in summary form to provide one additional illustration of how feedback can become more actionable as feedback givers are assisted in coming down their ladders of inference.

**Context:** Jane was an Executive Vice President who was fairly new to a huge privately held firm with strong traditions and cultural expectations for how things should and should not be done. The initial feedback given was that she was not a team player and was contentious. In this case the pivotal key person interview came with Jane's boss, the president of one of the firm's leading business units.

### Dialogue

President: Jane is not a team player and is contentious

Coach: Can you give an example of what Jane does that leads you to conclude that she is not a team player and is contentious?

President: She is inappropriately challenging and disruptive.

Coach: Can you give me an example of that?

President: Well, she publicly shared reservations in my top management meeting about a project that was really already decided on. You see, by the time an issue gets to the top team meeting, it should already be decided on. These meetings are more symbolic and more like just giving a blessing to the plan. Rather than making the effort to work out potential disagreements before the meeting, she waited until it was basically a done deal, and then publicly challenged it.

After asking a few more questions we clarified that the feedback giver was mainly concerned about her behavior within the context of top management team meetings. His request was that she bring her disagreements to him in private to work them out prior to top team meetings. This feedback was much more actionable than his original statement. Jane learned that she had misread the culture of this organization and the expectations surrounding the top team meetings. Coming from another organization, she had expected that the top team meetings would be problem solving sessions to jointly thrash out differences among the President and his key lieutenants on the team. Instead, the President saw these top team meetings as blessing sessions, to ratify decisions reached earlier with each of the relevant Executive Vice Presidents. Compounding the problem, Jane's boss had never informed her about his expectations. Similarly, none of her new peers pointed out these unstated expectations either. Thanks to her 360-degree feedback, Jane finally had clarity on what her boss wanted from her.

In sum, we relied on our third-party perspective and knowledge of the ladder of inference and attributional bias to help feedback givers retrace their own inference making process to get more concrete, valid data. We also applied our coaching skills by listening first, asking searching questions, and then providing actionable feedback that could be easily assimilated and acted upon. Compared to the original feedback statements, the re-crafted feedback was framed less as a personal attack, was less vague, had more specific illustrations, a clearer range of application, and more specific implications for action. When it was reported, it was received constructively.

In addition, and while difficult to gauge, we believe that this process reduced the intensity of the givers' negative emotions and their overconfidence. Whereas some of the initial feedback statements were accompanied by a tone of voice, body language, or facial expression that suggested irritation with the receiver, these indicators seemed

much more subdued and the givers more reflective after the questioning. Also, some feedback givers have volunteered in the course of interview sessions to have arrived at insights (and even an "Epiphany" about one of our clients) during a key person interview. The case with the Vice Chairman is a particularly powerful illustration of reducing overconfidence. Although he started out blaming Pat, he eventually ended up taking personal responsibility for not having tested his attribution about Pat; and he even provided an opportunity for Pat to prove himself.

### **Putting This Knowledge to Work: Towards an Actionable Feedback Environment**

In the cases described above, the third party was hired both to gather and deliver the feedback. However, many organizations may not choose to allocate resources to doing 360-degree feedback with key person interviews; alternatively, managers may need or want to formulate and deliver their own feedback. This final section of the paper illustrates how understanding the cognitive and emotional dynamics described above can be useful to managers who need or choose to take the initiative for formulating and delivering feedback themselves.

We believe that understanding these dynamics and their assets and liabilities for each of the three roles of feedback giver, feedback receiver, and third party is important for developing an actionable feedback environment. We will explain the common vulnerabilities associated with each role and how understanding the dynamics can assist a manager in any of these roles to support the development of actionable feedback.

### **Feedback Giving Role**

As was illustrated above, the feedback that managers spontaneously give is often not very actionable and tends to produce defensiveness, hard feelings, and meager learning. Without an awareness of the cognitive and emotional dynamics in play, managers have a difficult time knowing why their feedback is not working, and many learn to avoid giving feedback.

By contrast, managers who understand these dynamics can take a more informed approach to giving feedback.<sup>43</sup> Rather than attribute defensiveness to the receiver's unwillingness to face the truth, they can see that defensiveness may be provoked by the poor quality of their feedback. In addition, they are aware that feedback that is more

actionable will produce less defensiveness, more learning, and better results.

With an understanding of these dynamics, they can become aware that they may not be good judges of the quality of their own feedback. They also recognize that subordinates are affected by their own cognitive and emotional dynamics and may have difficulty learning from feedback that is not formulated and delivered effectively. In addition, they also become aware that a third party can be a great asset by being better able to see and point out the limitations in the feedback that the managers are working to refine.

Of course, a skilled coach or human resource professional can be very helpful here. A skilled facilitator can help more quickly to achieve actionable feedback. However, whether the person has training or not, merely having a third-party perspective in and of itself can be helpful. The observers can at least point out what is not clear, explain how they imagine the feedback would be interpreted, and describe how it might impact the receiver. In addition, a third party who understands the ladder of inference can help the feedback giver move down the ladder to produce more concrete and specific feedback.

Furthermore, if a third party is not readily available, managers can now have the basic insights necessary to produce better feedback on their own. They are aware that they retrace the steps in their own inference-making process by walking down the ladder of inference while watching for overconfidence, attributional biases, and emotional baggage. The following are good questions we can ask ourselves to get down the ladder and improve our feedback:

- How did I arrive at this conclusion?
- What illustrations, examples, etc. would I need to share with the other person in order for him or her to understand why I see it this way?
- Under what conditions have I observed this behavior?
- What do I see as the specific, undesirable consequences of this behavior?
- What would be the most constructive way to help this person achieve better results?
- How might my emotions be affecting my evaluation and intentions?

If a feedback giver nonetheless experiences a defensive reaction, a knowledge of the cognitive and emotional dynamics may enable them to handle it more constructively. Specifically, they understand why the receiver might be skeptical of the feedback; thus, they are more likely to inquire into what other data or examples the receiver might

find useful in assessing the validity of the feedback.

In addition, a technique that can be helpful is formulating feedback using an "I" message. People tend to formulate feedback starting with "You," such as "You are . . .," "You did . . .," or "You caused . . .," and such feedback tends to be received as an attack. By contrast, formulating feedback using an "I" message helps the feedback giver to "own"—acknowledge and take personal responsibility for—his or her emotional reactions that might affect the way they formulate and give the feedback. This can help managers keep focused on the task and task learning while producing feedback that is less harsh and attacking.

To illustrate how an "I" message could make the feedback more constructive, consider the following initial thought that a manager might have and how it can be transformed using an "I" message. Upon observing deficient performance, a manager might have an immediate thought such as: "You would have to be a complete idiot to handle that situation the way you did, or maybe you just don't give a damn about your performance. Either way, you better not do that again." If the manager were to share this thought, it would likely provoke a defensive reaction. Now consider the following example that illustrates how the feedback could be formulated more constructively using an "I" message:

*I feel frustrated because I perceive that the way this situation was handled may have (fill in the blank. . .damaged my credibility with my own boss, or caused us not to hit our sales target, etc.). I would like to have a discussion in which we clarify what happened, understand why, and explore what we can do to keep this from happening in the future.*

In sum, understanding the cognitive and emotional dynamics associated with giving and receiving feedback puts managers in a better position to navigate the feedback territory. They know the direction they need to go, what to watch out for, and what resources can help them. Consequently, they are more likely to go into feedback sessions better prepared, with a more open and less condescending attitude, and be better able to manage defensive reactions if they occur.

### **Feedback Receiving Role**

Although we have focused primarily on the role for the feedback giver, managers typically have bosses of their own and thus also become feedback recipients. Thus, managers may also be vulnera-



ble to the same cognitive and emotional dynamics their subordinates face in receiving feedback. However, understanding these dynamics may enable managers to recognize the importance of striking a balance between maintaining positive self-perceptions and periodically adjusting self-perceptions for the sake of learning.

Another complication is that their bosses may not understand the cognitive and emotional dynamics that affect feedback givers, and thus may give feedback that is not actionable and that may not even be accurate. The typical receiver might feel unfairly attacked and also might feel stuck, not wanting to seem defensive, but not wanting to accept inaccurate feedback. However, with an understanding of the cognitive and emotional dynamics, the receiver is more capable of recognizing that the giver may have misperceptions but may also have some helpful observations that should be uncovered. Rather than feel stuck, the receiver can ask questions that will help the giver move down the ladder of inference and provide more actionable feedback. For example, the receiver can ask questions such as:

- Could you give me an example of the behavior that concerns you?
- Can you help me understand how you came to that conclusion?
- Can you help me understand the situations in which you have seen the behavior and what you see as the impact?
- Can you clarify what you would like to see me do differently?

One additional common problem is that many managers fear giving critical feedback, so they avoid doing so.<sup>44</sup> Under these conditions, receivers will not learn unless they proactively seek feedback. With an understanding of the dynamics and with a set of questions to ask to help facilitate the development of actionable feedback, the receiver is better positioned to ask for feedback and receive a useful response.

### **Third-Party Role**

Given the vulnerabilities associated with both the giver and the receiver role, a third party who does not have strong emotions about the situation can offer a more objective perspective that can be invaluable to those who are giving and receiving feedback. Third parties can be especially helpful if they understand the cognitive and emotional dynamics associated with the other roles and if they have some training in how to intervene. Third parties can help feedback givers to formulate better

quality feedback by asking the kinds of questions that we illustrated in the three cases above. Such questions help feedback givers come down their ladder of inference and produce feedback that is more actionable. The same kinds of questions as described above can be helpful:

- Could you give me an example of the behavior that concerns you?
- Can you help me understand how you came to that conclusion?
- Can you help me understand the situations in which you have seen the behavior and what you see as the impact?
- Can you clarify what you would like to see this receiver do differently?

In addition to assisting in the formulation of feedback, third parties can help feedback givers prepare by role playing possible reactions that the receiver might have and coaching the giver on how to deal with them constructively. Third parties might ask themselves the following question: "What would I be feeling if I received that feedback and why would it provoke that reaction?" Reporting their answers to this question could provide an additional valuable source of data for the feedback provider. Furthermore, in cases where troubled communication between the giver and receiver exists, third parties could also sit in on the feedback session and intervene as necessary.

One of the main complications for third parties is that they may not feel knowledgeable or skilled enough to assist. However, the third parties have potential value even if they lack training. In such cases, they can simply empathize with how they would feel if they were receiving the feedback, and respond with statements such as: "If I received that feedback, I would be puzzled as to what you wanted me to do differently. Could you be more specific?" Although this kind of trial-and-error approach may not be elegant, it may still help feedback givers to be more constructive than they would be otherwise.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we have explained that critical feedback delivery often turns out to be more painful and less useful than it should be. This is because cognitive and emotional dynamics lead feedback givers to produce poor quality feedback and lead them to have difficulty seeing the weaknesses of their feedback. At the same time, the cognitive and emotional reactions experienced by receivers can provoke extreme negative reactions even to accurate feedback. Through understanding these dy-

namics, enlisting third parties, and self-questioning, managers can deliver more actionable feedback that produces greater learning, less defensiveness, and more appropriate action.

## Endnotes

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