



FEEDBACK? OR FEEDFORWARD?

Years ago, the CEO of an industry-leading pharmaceutical company made a passing comment that wound up sending shock waves down the ranks: “I have never really cared for the term ‘feedback.’”

The dominos that statement set in motion were predictable, dysfunctional and (as long as you weren’t in the middle of the mess associated with the response) comical: “OK, everybody in learning and development (L&D), this just in! The CEO hates the term ‘feedback!’ We need to find out how many times it appears in our offerings and identify alternatives.”

FEEDFORWARD IS A POSITIVE AND UPBEAT EXCHANGE THAT IS MULTIDIRECTIONAL.

The first phase of that directive was completed expeditiously. And the results were overwhelming. The term “feedback” appeared tens of thousands of times. Every course that had anything to do with leadership or change or performance management or trust featured “feedback” as the straw stirring those drinks. As the data made its way up the L&D chain of command “Operation Identify Alternatives” went quickly and quietly away.

Of course, the term “feedback” remains ubiquitous. It is not only tied to the terms already mentioned but also perceived as the driving force of transparency, authenticity and truth. Despite all of this

— and in a clear effort to perhaps swim upstream on the topic — consider the possibility that our CEO friend may have been onto something.

The term “feedback” has been with us since the 1920s. It originated as technical lingo in electrical science and was adopted in the 1940s to describe how well — or how poorly — someone was performing a task. In a world where communication and decision-making flowed from the top of an organization downward, feedback became the glue that kept the hierarchy together.

An unintended consequence associated with feedback is the general manner in which it is perceived. When somebody wants to give you some feedback, what is the first thing that jumps into your head? Many of us brace for “a growth opportunity” that (like it or not) will initiate with the critique of something that has already happened that we are powerless to go back and fix.

Another undeniable reality connected to feedback is the emphasis on ensuring people know how to provide it and the assumption that those on the receiving end know how to accept it. With the benefit of hindsight, doesn’t that almost seem backward? It seems like receiving and translating that input into actionable strategies deserves at least equal time.

WHAT IS FEEDFORWARD?

Enter “feedforward!” Feedforward is a concept that Marshall brought

to us a decade or so ago. With bias duly noted, it’s a lot like feedback — only better! First and foremost, it is a positive and upbeat exchange that is multidirectional (i.e., flows down, laterally and up). There are two roles in feedforward:

- Learn as much as you can!
- Help as much as you can!

There are two rules for providing and receiving feedforward:

Don’t talk about the past: Since we can’t change what has already happened, let’s put our energy and focus where we can indeed have an impact.

Don’t judge or critique suggestions: Treat whatever suggestions or ideas you hear as gifts (simply say, “Thank you!”).

It has been our experience that leaders who actively solicit and thoughtfully provide feedforward, build teams and cultivate cultures that inherently have their eyes on the windshield and the horizon in front of them instead of whatever happens to be going on in their rearview mirrors. ☺

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