



NEXT JUMP

Leadership Academy

Next Jump Academy Brief ^{BETA}
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INTRODUCTION

Feedback has always been crucial for advancing learning - both individual and organizational. However, the promise of feedback has been much harder to realize in practice in most workplaces. Feedback conversations count as some of the hardest ones to have for most people. There is often little honest feedback being offered amidst the common fears of hurting relationships, managing impressions or being reprimanded. It is no easier to receive feedback “constructively” and use it to change personal behaviors. This is complicated by the degree to which feedback, even today, takes place in context of performance evaluation and compensation decisions and discussions. What would it look like to decouple feedback from its traditional performance appraisal goals, and instead deploy it for people development and as decision making data?

The brief takes a “frequently asked questions” approach, with five sets of FAQs that each draw from seminal research into feedback and related organizational learning topics. The *first FAQ* explores the common phenomena of organizational silence and the challenges that organizational members confront in “speaking up”. The *second FAQ* draws on very recent research from the fields of curiosity and creativity to offer new ways for thinking about feedback-giving. The *third FAQ* lays out the well-researched challenges of receiving critical feedback; this includes the key personality characteristics of feedback-receiver associated with how feedback is processed. The *fourth FAQ* deep dives into the topic of proactive, deliberate feedback-seeking, including what it looks like, its value in today’s work contexts and what factors influence its occurrence in organizations. In the final FAQ, research from decision sciences illustrates the role of feedback in honing an individual’s intuitive expertise. At the end, in the references section, you will find a curated list of some of the main research articles that went into preparing this brief.

The goal of this research brief is two-fold. The first is to share with you some of the key research from feedback and related areas that lays out what is widely known on the topic. This includes current as well as historical research that has shaped our beliefs and thinking about feedback in the workplace. A second intent with this brief is that it illustrates some of the key aspects of the feedback culture at Next Jump, and the way it is designed. For example, the first FAQ on employee voice and organizational silence begins to explain the value of having an anonymous platform such as the feedback-app that can offer a safe space for employees to voice concerns and critical feedback, particularly upwards. In a similar vein, recent research on feedback-giving in creative contexts highlights the emphasis that Next Jump places on the role of intuition when giving feedback.

FAQ 1: EMPLOYEE VOICE AND ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE

What is the phenomenon of organizational silence?

Employee voice is the proactive, voluntary sharing of suggestions, concerns, opinions and feedback about work-related issues, with the primary goal of strengthening organizational performance. But when employees feel that speaking up with negative feedback or voicing concerns and problems is likely to be futile or dangerous, it perpetrates a culture of organizational silence.

What factors reinforce a culture of silence?

One key factor that creates such a culture of silence is the fear in organization's senior leadership of receiving negative feedback, especially from subordinates. Research suggests that feedback from below is often seen as less accurate and legitimate, and as more threatening to one's power and credibility. This fear of critical feedback is thought to be especially high in more senior managers, as they often feel a strong need to avoid embarrassment, threat and feelings of vulnerability. The inclination then is to avoid any information that could suggest weakness. But such resistance to feedback, promotes conditions such as excluding employees from decision making to avoid dissent or feedback, lack of formal upward feedback mechanisms, centralized decision making and hostility towards those carrying bad news or negative feedback.

What are the implications of an organization where employees don't speak up?

Such a climate of silence will impede organizational change and development as without critical feedback corrective actions can't be taken when errors are made. Less

visibly perhaps, it also comes in the way of forging a diverse and pluralistic organizational fabric that allows an expression of diverse conflicting perspectives. This is problematic because multiple and divergent points of view are crucial for effective organizational decision making.

Thus, to buffer against such a climate of silence, organizations need to create structures and practices that 1) enable every employee to freely and safely speak up with critical feedback and voice independent opinions while 2) strengthening the capacities to take in, process and learn from the critical feedback being voiced.

FAQ 2: FEEDBACK-GIVING

What kind of feedback has traditionally been considered helpful?

Historically, research suggests that positive feedback that affirms a behavior, is concrete and task-focused is more likely to generate positive changes in individual performance. However more recent research indicates that specific feedback is most helpful for tasks that are simple, straightforward or codifiable. In such contexts, increasing the specificity of feedback might improve initial performance during *practice* phase. On the flip side though, more specific feedback tends to reduce the level of exploration, and undermines the learning needed for later, more independent performance.

How does feedback-giving need to change when the feedback is offered for work that is complex and involves creativity?

Specific feedback is less effective in the complex and ambiguous world of creative work. Feedback giving and feedback seeking for creative work is most effective when "it finds a middle path between being too directive or too

diffused” (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017, p. 2052), and offers individuals “interpretational flexibility to see new connections” (Hargadon & Bechky, 2006, p. 493).

Typical definitions of feedback often mistakenly assume that those giving feedback have a clear sense of what should be done, or what “success” should look like. However, increasingly in today’s world, feedback has to be given on ambiguous, complex tasks, with the feedback-giver also working to understand the newness. In such a scenario, the feedback-givers need more latitude and not be overly constrained in the feedback they have to give. In addition, feedback-givers often draw on their subjective, visceral reactions as a form of intuitive judgment. To summarize, “feedback in complex situations need not be right; instead it needs to be right enough to generate additional exploration” (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017, p. 2066).

What aspects of the feedback-giving influence how the feedback is received?

Credibility of feedback-giver: Credibility is conceptualized as the feedback-giver’s expertise and trustworthiness. Feedback from individuals who 1) have observed the feedback-receiver’s behaviors, 2) are in a position to form an informed opinion, and 3) have motives for providing feedback that can be trusted, are likely to have more influence on the feedback-receiving individual’s behavior.

Feedback quality: Feedback that receivers perceive to be high-quality tends to be specific, consistent across time, and feels useful. How useful the feedback is, from the point of view of the person receiving it, is an important factor in whether the person accepts the feedback and what he or she does with it.

Feedback delivery: A feedback-receiver’s perceptions of the feedback-giver’s intentions in

giving feedback tends to influence reactions and response to the feedback. These perceptions are often shaped by the way the message is framed and delivered.

How might feedback-giving also be a mechanism for becoming more aware of own blind-spots?

Almost everyone is vulnerable to cognitive illusions and blindspots that compromise the quality of decision making. However, it is a tough ask to build sufficient awareness of the many biases that interfere with the quality of our judgment. Poor decisions or lapses in intuition don’t always come with warning bells. Daniel Kahneman points to “educating gossip .. learning to critique other people” (Kahneman & Klein, 2010, p. 3) as perhaps as the only way to truly “debias” oneself. This thesis rests on the belief we are all programmed to notice errors, biases and failures in others’ decision making and actions much more easily in than our own. So if gossip means discussing others' mistakes then "educating" gossip is a more systematic, disciplined, and precise discussion of these mistakes. As Kahneman notes “.. it is much easier to identify a minefield when you observe others wander into it than when you are about to do so. Observers are less cognitively busy and more open to information than actors”.

FAQ 3: FEEDBACK-RECEIVING

What makes it challenging to take in critical feedback, and what are some common responses when receiving negative feedback?

People, in general, prefer self-confirmatory feedback aligning with their desired self-image. Any input from the environment that threatens this preferred image of the self can trigger defensive reactions ranging from resisting the feedback, to dismissing it and/or attacking the credibility of the source. Recent research suggests that an individual’s social context plays

a significant role in maintaining and validating one's self-concept. Hence one tendency upon receiving critical, disconfirming feedback is to reshape the social network to move away from the critical feedback givers and instead move closer to those providing more self-affirming feedback. This creates a sort of an "echo chamber" where the individual is now surrounding herself with those who have similar view points and thinking but are unlikely to share conflicting perspectives. The paradox is that such coping actions might feel comforting in the short term. However, in the long run such actions might not only limit personal growth and performance, but also constrain the quality of decision making.

What are the key psychological characteristics of the feedback-receiver which predicts how feedback is interpreted?

Goal orientation, locus of control and self-esteem are three personality characteristics that explain much of the variation in how individuals experience and interpret feedback.

Goal orientation: The goal orientation of the feedback recipient is the individual's internal logic or rationale for why the task is being performed. It influences whether individuals receive critical feedback in a way that advances future performance or not. In a performance situation, individuals can primarily orient themselves either towards performance, or towards learning. When the emphasis is on performance, the individual's primary concern is with demonstrating high ability and appearing competent. In contrast, with a learning orientation, "the emphasis is on improvement, developing skills, and mastering the task" (Ilgen & Davis, 2000, p. 556.) Research suggests that individuals will tend to interpret critical feedback on their performance very differently depending on whether they hold a performance or a learning orientation. Overall, critical feedback is more likely to have a desired,

positive impact if individuals are functioning from a learning goal orientation in contrast to performance goal. Performance actually worsens upon receiving critical feedback for individuals with lower self-efficacy who are oriented towards optimizing performance.

Locus of control: Research suggests that feedback-receivers with an internal locus of control, defined as those "holding beliefs that events that happen to them tend to be due to their own behavior," (Ilgen et al., 1979, p. 358) are more likely to draw feedback from the task they are performing and accept critical feedback. This is in contrast to the 'externals' who are likely to be "more motivated by feedback from powerful others" (p. 358) and rely less on self-generated data and interpretation.

Self-esteem: Critical feedback is generally more challenging to receive than positive feedback for most people. However, those individuals high in self-esteem will interpret the critical feedback on a failure or poor performance more graciously and mark themselves down less after such an event (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). They are also more likely to be less defensive in hearing critical feedback.

FAQ 4: FEEDBACK-SEEKING

What does feedback-seeking mean in an organizational context?

Feedback-seeking refers to individuals intentionally and proactively seeking feedback from their environment, on desired goals and objectives. There is an underlying assumption that when individuals proactively solicit critical feedback they will be less inclined to disregard it. There is also a greater chance that they will hear it less defensively and use it for improving performance.

What is the value of intentionally seeking feedback?

Feedback is a critical individual resource for achieving a wide range of valued goals and needs in organizations. It enables individuals to be aware of the contingencies in their environment; know which behaviors are most appropriate for achieving important goals; and discern how these goals are being evaluated and perceived by others around them.

What are the common ways that people seek feedback?

Broadly speaking, monitoring and inquiry are the two ways people seek feedback. In monitoring the individual discreetly scans the environment and individual behaviors for clues. Inquiry, on the other hand, involves direct, explicit conversation about feedback on some topic. Unsurprisingly, in many organization contexts, the inquiry model of seeking feedback can have potentially greater costs for the person seeking the feedback – risk appearing incompetent, exposing lack of knowing or hearing a disconfirming message about the self.

Which key factors shape feedback-seeking in organizations?

The relational context between feedback-giver and receiver/seeker influences the frequency of feedback seeking. Supportive interpersonal relationships, a supervisor's considerate leadership style can enhance or depress the fears of image costs, and thus the likelihood of seeking feedback. In the end, the larger organizational culture impacts seeking of feedback, in the meanings it gives to the act of seeking feedback – for example, does it signal learning and growth or insecurity and incompetence?

At the individual level, the individual's goal orientation once again impacts feedback-seeking

behavior. A learning goal orientation comes with the belief that ability is a malleable attribute that can be honed through effort and experience. A person with this orientation will tend to view feedback as diagnostic information about how to improve performance, rather than as a judgment of their competency and worth. They will perceive greater value and lower cost for feedback-seeking and will engage in more feedback seeking than individuals without this orientation. Moreover, when those with learning goal orientation face an unfavorable situation such as failing at some task or social rejection, they are more likely to adapt their response to maintain task interest, remain persistent and escalate effort. Thus, people with such orientation are likely to show greater resilience in face of a difficult feedback interaction (e.g. poorly framed and delivered feedback or critical feedback offered publicly).

When employees are young or new to the job or organization they are more likely to seek feedback because the information is particularly valuable to reduce uncertainty and to foster adaptation in their new role. There's also less to lose as they are expected to know less. In contrast senior employees are less likely to seek feedback because there might be greater threat of not knowing at higher levels and they often attach less value to feedback from below.

FAQ 5: DEVELOPING INTUITIVE EXPERTISE**Who is an expert?**

Expertise is often characterized by tacit knowledge and intuitive decision making. Experts often have superior situation awareness that is built on tacit knowledge and enables rapid and largely uneffortful (i.e. intuitive) decision making.

What is deliberate practice and how does it foster expertise development?

Deliberate practice plays a major role in expertise development. These activities are intentionally designed to improve domain specific skills, and tend to target deficiencies to improve performance. Deliberate practice is characterized by repetition, and it often involves setting goals for practice sessions and monitoring performance to try and achieve these goals.

What is ‘deliberate performance’ and how does it address the challenges of deliberate practice for those in the workplace?

Deliberate performance is defined as the “effort to increase domain expertise while engaged in routine work activity” (Fadde & Klein, 2010, p. 6). The goal here is to build the tacit knowledge and intuitive expertise that are associated with extensive job experience. It is more appropriate for people who are already competent in their jobs than it is for initial learning by novice.

The problem with deliberate practice is that few professions outside of music and sports have a culture of practice. Thus while deliberate practice is an inviting path to expertise, it is impractical for majority of professional and business people.

What are the necessary conditions for skill learning and how are these adapted in deliberate performance?

Traditionally there are four necessary conditions for learning any skill.

A. Repetition: This is addressed by developing exercises that use everyday work activities and by drawing on observations of other performers, and self-observation.

- B. Timely feedback: This is crucial because research suggests that the longer the delay in feedback, the more difficult it is to connect feedback to performance. In addition, this feedback should not depend on performance review by supervisor. The idea is to not leave the employee overly dependent on external/expert feedback but build their skills to develop their own sources of feedback.
- C. Task variety: this is important to prevent people from fixating on the way they identify the problems and prevent them from fixating on routine strategies. It’s a counter point to repetition.
- D. Progressive difficulty: Give people tougher jobs once they have mastered easier ones.

How might intuition and analysis productively co-exist in decision making?

The synthesis between intuition and analysis that seems most effective is when we put intuition in the driver's seat so that it directs our analysis of our circumstances. This way, intuition helps us recognize situations and helps us decide how to react, and analysis verifies our intuitions to make sure they aren't misleading us.

Analysis and intuition work together in the human mind. Although intuition is the final fruit, analytic thinking is necessary for beginners learning a new skill. It is also useful at the highest levels of expertise, where it can sharpen and clarify intuitive insights. Another way to think of this distinction is that intuition works like our peripheral vision to keep us oriented and aware of our surroundings, while our analytical abilities enable us to think precisely.

Stuti Shukla is a Doctoral candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. For her dissertation Stuti is conducting a deep-dive ethnographic study of the feedback culture at Next Jump through longitudinal observations and interviews. The goal of Stuti’s research is to unpack and represent what it looks like to truly deploy feedback towards transformational growth and learning, across the entire enterprise. The study involves mapping the diverse feedback practices, capturing individual member’s experience of giving and getting feedback, and clarifying the systemic conditions that sustain such a growth-oriented feedback culture.

Since September 2017, Stuti has spent close to 400 hours studying feedback at Next Jump. This includes “live” observations of more than 30 instances of in-person feedback practices, which is in sharp contrast to the “behind-closed-doors” and confidential nature of feedback interactions in most organizations. Stuti has also participated in three cycles of the key recruiting event (Super Saturdays) and two Leadership Academies prior to this one. Since February 2018, Stuti is spending 3-4 days/week at the Cambridge office which is giving her a much closer, and behind-the-scenes view of how feedback is woven into the everyday life at Next Jump.

During her time at Harvard, Stuti has taught adult development programs and adaptive leadership at the Kennedy School. Prior to Harvard, she has spent over 8 years working towards the cause of scaling quality public education in India as part of the leadership team at Pratham, one of India’s largest education non-profits.

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