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SUCCESSFUL TEAMS WITH A FREE FLOW OF FEEDBACK

How sharing feedback helps your team work better together, become more flexible and strengthens results.

INTRODUCTION

Feedback often has a negative connotation and executives as well as organizations regularly struggle with it. Yet, feedback is an essential part of a healthy professional culture and can help boost organizational growth tremendously. Provided, of course, that feedback is shared freely and your intention is to help the other person with it.

This e-book is about what feedback is, but also, crucially, what it is not.

We look at its relationship with organizational culture, the pre-conditions and the importance of leadership.

The goal is to make feedback a normal and essential part of the way we work together and as a condition for success!

We hope you enjoy this e-book and that it will be of real value to you as you share feedback more freely within your own team and organization.

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FEEDBACK, WHAT IT IS AND IS NOT

We have a love-hate relationship with feedback. But why, really? To find out, we'll start by discovering what feedback is, what it isn't and look at existing preconceptions.

What is feedback?

The concept of 'feedback' comes originally from systems theory and refers to "returning or 'feeding' back to input" . Both verbal and non-verbal feedback are reactions to a previous action by which you influence that action. Think of how you drive a car: by making small corrections to the steering wheel you make sure that the car stays on the road and that you reach your destination safely. The same principle applies in a work situation. During meetings or in personal conversations you hear or see what colleagues are (possibly) struggling with. This can give you clues as to how you could be of help to a colleague.

Criticism?

We often see that people experience feedback as criticism. This is not justified and also unnecessary. Criticism often contains a judgment while feedback is a constructive way of communicating about objectively observable behavior.

"What a good presentation you gave this morning in the MT, both your story and your slides were clear and comprehensive. I saw you found the questions difficult to start with, but you formulated your answers very clearly so that everyone now has a good understanding of the subject matter."

Feedback or feedforward?

Hockey coach, Marc Lammers, prefers not to talk about feedback in his book 'Flow' (2015), because he believes that in sport there is too much emphasis on training the skills that athletes haven't mastered yet. On the contrary, he wants hockey players to learn to see themselves playing well in a future scenario as the trainer envisions it. The feedforward-giver is thus the determiner of the desired behavior and what the other person should or should not do with it. Feedforward is only effective if the receiver is also aware of what is going well or less well.

In feedback, the person that provides the feedback describes as objectively as possible what he or she observes and what the effect of this is. It is then up to the receiver of the feedback to determine whether, and if so, what he or she is going to do with it. Feedforward can therefore be a good supplement to feedback but can never replace it.

> *"Feedback is the breakfast of champions."*
>
> ***Ken Blanchard***

What feedback isn't

Feedback isn't about you, the feedback giver, but about helping the other person improve their performance. Before we delve deeper into that, we'd also like to take a moment to ask what feedback is not.

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1. Feedback is not advice

Giving feedback is a reaction to a certain situation. What the other person then does with it, is up to the other person. When you supplement the feedback with advice on how the other person can translate the feedback into action, you are actually filling in the follow-up action for the other person. You imply that you know better and you deprive the other person of the chance to think for themselves how things could be done differently.

2. Feedback is not an attack on the other person

When feedback is about something the other person has done, it isn't feedback on the person themselves. Anyway, it's questionable whether it's up to you to find and say something about the personality, motives or feelings of the other. Stick to the 'action' you have signaled and separate the person from the action.

3. Feedback is not vague and unclear

Let's assume for the sake of convenience that everyone wants to do a good job. It's nice to get the best possible insight into what's going well and where improvements could be made. So be specific in your feedback, state *what* you thought was good (or not so good) in a particular situation and *why* it struck you as important.

4. Feedback is not about you

Generally, in a team or organization, everyone has the same goals in mind. Satisfied customers, increasing market share, the best products and professional service. The level of those goals, the mix and relationship between the goals and the internal ways of working are, of course, different from company to company. But those goals do form the common reference point to relate your feedback to. Feedback is not random. It cannot be given just because the feedback giver is annoyed by something or has a personal view about what's important. When feedback is related to the team goals or organizational results, it's functional and helps the other to develop further, thus contributing to the joint enterprise and the common result.

5. Feedback does not have to cause a fuss

When you think that feedback could be experienced as criticism or that the other person might get hurt, there is often a fear that the relationship with the other person will suffer. But why? Continue to see feedback as functional feedback to help the other person, and therefore the team, become more successful. Keep the action separate from the person and make feedback concrete. Make sure the recipient can do something useful with it.

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Feedback works both ways

As Bill Gates puts it so nicely, getting feedback is *the* way to improve ourselves. It works both ways. Invite your colleague to give you feedback and see it as an opportunity to develop yourself further. And, not unimportantly: feedback is not just about what you can improve, but also about insight into what you do well or where your strengths lie. You are in control of what you ask feedback for, so start small if you are reluctant. Suppose you get feedback you're not happy with? Try not to get defensive but ask for clarification. It could just be that the other person sees something that you yourself were not aware of and that you can work with. How gratifying is that?

FEEDBACK CULTURE

In the previous chapter, we saw that feedback is a constructive way to help another person move forward. But how do you make sure that this becomes the norm in organizations, and that we no longer find it scary or uncomfortable to give or receive feedback? In this chapter we briefly discuss what an organizational culture is and then we look at how you can stimulate a feedback culture in your organization.

Organizational Culture

Everyone has an image or a feeling about the concept of 'organizational culture' and a lot has been written about it, witness the large number of studies and (academic) articles that have been devoted to it, often with all kinds of typologies (e.g. the OCAI-model of Quinn and Cameron) or dimensions (e.g. Geert Hofstede).
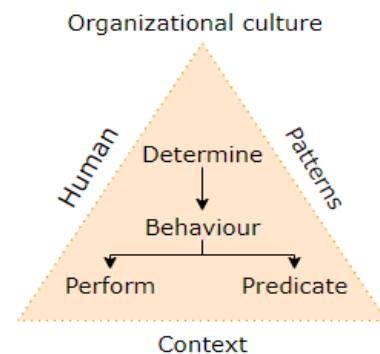
At InContext, we don't want to make things unnecessarily complicated and therefore we prefer to look at what really makes a difference and that is: *the (collective) behavior of people in organizations*. Thus: culture = behavior. We use a model that emphasizes the connection between three different aspects that influence behavior: 'people', 'context' and 'patterns'.

'Person' refers to the identity and personality traits of individual employees. 'Context' deals with factors within an organization that are external to the employee, such as the reward system and the behavior of leaders. 'Patterns', finally, is about ingrained habits that have to do with interaction and image formation between groups and individuals. These are often deeply rooted in the organization and have a major impact on behavior.

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Trust

Mutual trust within teams is an important factor for a culture in which feedback is freely shared. In strong teams, team members dare to speak out, everyone is heard and there is an open atmosphere. Commitment grows from this foundation and team members take their responsibility and the joint focus is on results. Dealing with each other constructively and solving any conflicts is a necessity, but it is also a requirement for giving and receiving good feedback.

Growth mindset

Once trust is established, the next step is to use feedback as a learning tool. Having a learning attitude is important here. The American psychologist, Carol Dweck, became known for the distinction she made between a *fixed* and a *growth mindset*. The idea behind this is that some people assume that

success is the result of innate ability and can therefore be hard to develop (*fixed mindset*). There are also those who believe that success is based on the right mindset, hard work, training and tenacity (*growth mindset*).

Learning organization

People with a high growth mindset like to take on challenges and use feedback to learn from them. Someone with a fixed mindset might experience feedback as criticism and be put off by it. Feedback is an important component of a learning culture and an important condition for growing together as a team, a team with a growth mindset. What's your team like? Which mindset do you use to face challenges, is there mutual trust and is feedback shared freely?

FEEDBACK AND LEADERSHIP

Leaders are essential for the creation of strong teams, a learning culture and a high-performance organization. Anyone can be a leader - managers and directors, but, of course, team members, too.

Openness

The message for leaders is simple: openness creates openness. This has an immensely positive effect on team culture and performance. It motivates people to be authentic, increases mutual understanding and provides the basis to shape and strengthen collaboration and communication constructively, effectively and enjoyably where and when needed. Equally important: it lowers the threshold in the team for giving each other feedback. For example, to give someone a sign if they step into their (self-indicated) pitfall, no longer show effective behavior and therefore don't deliver the performance that their potential suggests. Also, to name the things that are going well and that you appreciate so much about the other harvests the positive effects of recognition and appreciation.

Leadership

Strong leaders have a growth mindset, admit their mistakes, actively ask for feedback and for help, especially in determining strategy. After all, who knows better what customers really need and how to implement it most effectively and smartly than the people most in contact with them?

It is the core of the increasingly popular theory of *secure base leadership*: as a manager, start by providing a safe environment in which everyone matters and then offer your team members a good example; the inspiration and energy to develop courage, take risks and fall down and get up again.

Professional courage

Leaders who have the courage to shape their leadership in this way are really strong! And it also offers many advantages: first of all, their feedback to employees becomes a lot more credible. Because who is not more likely to accept something from someone if they themselves are open to feedback and dare to hold up a mirror to themselves? In addition, it creates a culture in which everyone actively asks for feedback and the team is constantly working to improve performance. Finally, letting go of perfectionism provides an enormous lightness and relaxation, an atmosphere in which people really start to grow. After all, you no longer have to pretend to be in control and always feel you have to bring the very best version of yourself to work. Your work environment doesn't have to be like Instagram!

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Emotional intelligence

Daniel Goleman explains in his book *'Emotional Intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ'* that this process starts with realizing how you yourself look at the world, what your values, (limiting) convictions and qualities and pitfalls are. And what effect this may have on others, both positive and less constructive. The next step is always to be willing to make the investment, to really want to understand and respect the other person's viewpoint, qualities and pitfalls. Then the last step to achieving a pleasant and mutually reinforcing cooperation is suddenly an easy and joint enterprise.

This sounds good on paper, but does it work in practice? Without a doubt! We have seen many examples in recent years where this form of leadership caused a major turnaround. Where a leader in a team that was not yet functioning well first dared to openly look in the mirror, unhelpful patterns, images and demeanor were subsequently revealed in no time. Openness creates openness. And it is the catalyst for a better team atmosphere and better performance.

Culture of 'let it be'

Finally, let's dwell on another message that giving feedback sends out: the message that I take you seriously and am willing to invest in you. A powerful signal. Contrast that with the signal you send as a leader when you don't give someone feedback. The person in question (and probably the majority of their colleagues) also realize that something is amiss. Not discussing a case like this can reduce your credibility as a leader.
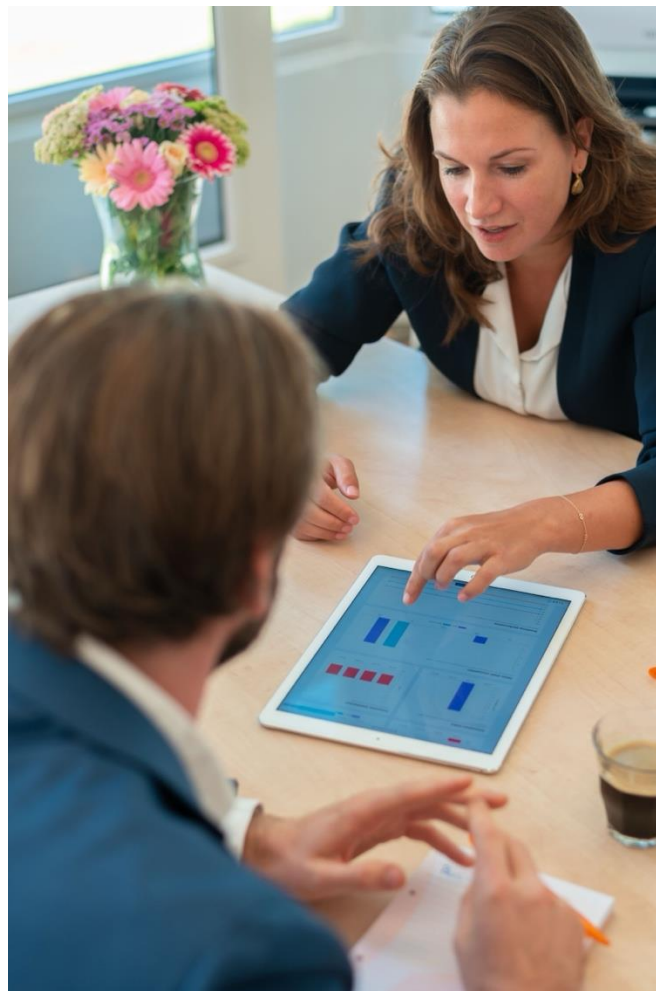
Yes, it takes courage to start the conversation, not only as a leader but for everyone involved. However, the alternative is an (unconscious) "let it be" culture. For those moments when you have to cross a threshold to give feedback don't lose your cool and do what llamas like to do. Compared to spitting at someone, suddenly engaging in a courageous conversation is a lot more appealing.

WHAT DOES A FREE FLOW OF FEEDBACK ACHIEVE?

Building a feedback culture, and therefore a learning and high-performance culture, will greatly benefit your organization. We describe this at three different levels: the organizational level, the team/departmental level, and the individual level.

With the constant flow of feedback, changes within or outside the organization are seen more quickly, their implications are discussed in depth, and ideas and adjustments are implemented quickly and effectively.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

More commitment

Employees show significantly higher levels of commitment to the organization in organizations where giving and receiving feedback is the norm and is aimed at developing people. The direct result of which is a lower staff turnover rate. This naturally delivers value to the organization because people are willing to put in the extra energy needed to achieve goals.

1 + 1 = 3

If an organization is able to harvest the valuable feedback shared within teams or departments and apply it more broadly, then the organization as a whole is enabled to learn and improve at a pace that is difficult to match by individual employees or more isolated teams.

Growth and agility

Organizations that recognize the value of feedback and create the space for it are more flexible.

TEAM LEVEL

Trust and Understanding

The relationship between trust and understanding is often challenged by a chicken or the egg discussion. In our view, it is irrelevant which comes first. A lack of feedback is where the danger lies. If you want more trust and understanding in the team, start giving more feedback and especially asking for it. Of course, when there is a complete lack of trust, this can be difficult, but we consider the cost of not breaking through such a situation to be much higher than the cost of potentially difficult situations created by giving or asking for feedback.

Common language

Teams that make extensive use of feedback generally communicate more clearly and efficiently. By sharing lots of feedback, team members not only help each other do their jobs better, they also create a common language they can use to get a point across clearly and quickly.

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Performance

Teams that share a lot of feedback with each other perform better than teams that don't. It sounds like an open door, but it remains possibly the most obvious and objective reason to encourage feedback in a team. Good, performance and development-oriented feedback ensures that a team not only learns from mistakes and thus performs better, but also can collectively set more ambitious goals.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Development and growth

Within teams where feedback is shared, employees experience more clarity about their role and are prepared to tackle it more broadly than the 'formal' description. As a result, they are well aware of what is expected of them, what they can expect from others, and how they can develop and grow.

"Faster alone, further together"

A free flow of feedback provides in-creased motivation for employees to not only do their jobs well, but to continue to grow and improve. In organizations where sharing feedback is normal and where it is focused on performance and development, it becomes a habit to also look for room for improvement them-selves in their immediate environment and in their own behavior. Sharing feedback creates more mutual trust and connection within the team.

Growth and fun

Sharing feedback creates trust and team members also get more recognition for the work they do. Small irritations or possible ambiguities are discussed in time and cannot develop into disruptions. This not only creates a pleasant work climate where each other's qualities (and pitfalls) are recognized, but the team is also a place where everyone can grow and have fun.

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OVER TO YOU?

We have seen that feedback literally means 'feeding back' whereby you use verbal or non-verbal signals to respond to an earlier action and thereby influence that action. Good feedback is worded in such a way that the other person can do something with it. Feedback is not about you, but about helping the other person.

Every journey always begins with a first step, so invite a colleague to give you feedback and see it as an opportunity to develop yourself further. And not unimportantly: feedback is not just about where you can improve, but also about insight into what you do well or where your strengths lie.

We also looked at the culture you and your teams operate in. Try looking at your own organization like an external consultant and discern, as they would, the visible and invisible patterns. In doing so, include the three perspectives - people, context and patterns. We discussed the importance of leadership at length with the key message:

openness creates openness. Leaders in organizations play an important role in working on mutual trust.

A feedback culture delivers for you, your team and your organization. In the involvement of employees and the preventing of unwanted turnover, but also in creating flexibility and achieving results. More trust and understanding are created at team level which also makes the communication between them more effective. Finally, individual employees experience a clearer division of roles and have a better view of the expectations and the big picture. This enables them to contribute more effectively to the success of the team and the organization while they themselves are motivated and grow.

A free flow of feedback, highly recommended for everyone!

Joep Wetzels, Dennis Bastiaenen, Thijs Bosselaar & Anouschka Lyklema

InContext Consultancy Group exists to provide all possible support to people who want to change something in their organization for the better. InContext supports substantial changes in organizations and in the behavior of people. This is illustrated in our motto "The people side of business - The business side of people".

With this unique combination of knowledge and skills, of hard and soft, we place every intervention in the context of each organization and thus directly in the heart of the issue. With connection, impact and results.

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