

## **Praise for *Giving Good Feedback***

“I suspect I’m not alone in having given limited thought to what feedback is for, only focusing on it when the annual appraisal season comes up, or after a short training session. And few of us are comfortable with giving (or receiving) it. That’s why Margaret Cheng’s new book is so important. It helps us to re-think feedback, what it’s for and how we should use it. She reminds us that it’s about much more than those annual appraisals. It should be all about learning and developing. *Giving Good Feedback* provides proper guidance on how to tackle it, and how to make it a more routine – and less painful – part of our working lives.”

– Paul Johnson, Director of the Institute of Fiscal Studies and author of *Follow the Money*

“There are perhaps no words more dreaded at work than ‘Can I give you some feedback?’ Most of us hate giving it, most of us, if we’re honest, hate receiving it. Margaret Cheng’s brilliant book is a mixture of well-researched perspectives, some of the most helpful models and approaches, and pearls of wisdom from her own impressive career. It’s as entertaining and interesting as it is practical. This will definitely be a book I keep coming back to.”

– Graham Allcott, author of *How to be a Productivity Ninja*

# Giving Good Feedback

Margaret Cheng

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For Steve

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# Introduction: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

A long time ago, in the testosterone-fuelled world that was the financial services sector in the 1990s, four very senior managers found their way to the HR department.

Like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, they came with doom-laden messages.

“I need you to have a word with Bill. People are leaving in droves because of him.”

“You have to talk to Reuben. No one will sit next to him.”

“You’ve got to sort Belinda out before I strangle her.”

“Look what Phil’s done now. I don’t believe he’s still doing this.”

It seemed that Bill walked around with his head in the air, yelling things at staff like, “That wasn’t a request, Clive, just do it!”; Belinda kept shredding important documents by mistake; and Phil had sent an email to a new member of staff with the subject heading “Yet another stupid thing you’ve done in the space of half an hour you complete \*\*\*\*wit”.

Reuben was the most straightforward of the four issues. Nobody wanted to sit next to him because he had a body odour problem.

The four horsemen were very senior, otherwise capable managers. None of them had tried talking to their staff about the impact of their behaviours on the organisation or the

people around them. They did not know how, and they did not want to learn. They were hoping HR could just sort it out for them, so they did not have to give *feedback*.

It turned out that the horsemen really were heralding an apocalypse. Not long afterwards, the firm collapsed dramatically, in the wake of a high-profile financial scandal.

I always wondered if the inability to give feedback was a significant contributory factor in the collapse. There were certainly quite a few Belindas at work, shredding important documents without understanding the consequences.

Of course, the four horsemen were not alone. Many people find giving feedback difficult and would rather leave it to others or hope the person concerned works it out for themselves.

And since the time of the four horsemen, the whole landscape around interpersonal relationships at work has been transformed. In the modern workplace, giving and receiving feedback at work is more important than ever as collaboration rather than top-down command-and-control leadership has become the order of the day. That doesn't make it any easier; it can feel more fraught and more complex than ever.

But difficult though you may find it, giving, receiving and soliciting feedback is critical to your development and growth as a human being – let alone as a leader. Most people want to do a good job at work, but it's not always easy to know how to improve and grow. Feedback is about *learning*: you cannot learn, or help others to learn, without it.

This book is divided into three parts and is designed to take you on a journey. At the beginning of each section, there are some questions for you to think about, so that you can link your own experience to the topics covered as you read.

By the time you have finished reading, you will have the answers to three key questions.

- Why is feedback so important?
- Why is it so hard?
- What can I do to make it easier?

**Part 1** looks at what feedback is and explains why it is so important to do it well.

In basic terms, feedback is about communication. In a simple communication loop, it's what closes that loop so that you know your message has been received and (you hope) understood. At work, it's a crucial tool for helping people to understand their impact and supporting their development.

However, feedback has been the subject of much recent thinking and debate.

At one end of the spectrum, the Silicon Valley experiments in radical transparency champion cultures where robust, frequent, candid and often critical feedback are seen as the way forward. Alternatively, Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall's feedback fallacy explores the limits of feedback, suggesting why it's not the route to improvement that we might think it is.

In the light of these debates, Part 1 explores how things can go wrong, both in the way people give feedback and the way they receive it and what makes it helpful or unhelpful. I take the idea of the feedback fallacy and turn this round to show that this is exactly why giving good feedback is hard but essential.

I also introduce my **giving good feedback framework**, which links the idea of a communication loop with David Kolb's experiential learning circle. Forward-looking constructive

feedback helps people move around the learning circle, via the key steps of experience, reflection and practice.

**Part 2** explores the idea that to give feedback well, you must start with yourself.

Everyone, consciously or not, has experiences and biases that can get in the way of giving good feedback. The trick is to improve your awareness of them so that you can work to overcome and mitigate them – and also understand how people on the receiving end might be feeling.

You'll be asked to consider what influences these areas have had on your own approach and responses to giving and receiving feedback, as well as your openness to asking for feedback on your own performance and behaviours.

And because no one works in isolation, I also explore how your approach to feedback is affected by organisational culture and consider how psychological safety can support positive feedback cultures.

There is a distinction between organisation-wide performance management systems and good, regular developmental feedback as part of everyday conversations and communication.

As part of those everyday conversations, I also look at the importance of clear expectations in supporting good feedback at work.

**Part 3** pulls everything together to offer support via a range of practical models and tools to make giving good feedback a routine part of your relationships at work.

It provides feedback and communication models, runs through practical examples, and invites you to work through checklists and case studies using your own examples.

You'll be reminded of the purpose of good feedback and the giving good feedback framework, starting with a clear assessment of what you want to give feedback on. There'll be guidance on how to articulate this in terms of clear, behaviour-related examples and advice in planning the conversations to get this across.

I also look at the emotions that people might experience when receiving feedback and guide you through planning and preparing for the more difficult conversations. I include empathy-mapping models and ways of handling reactions, for when feedback does not land as we intend.

Whatever you think about feedback, it remains an essential part of all communications and relationships – at work and elsewhere. Whether you love it, hate it, embrace it or avoid it, it's simply a fact of life. What follows offers a route map and guide to its power and pitfalls. The aim is to support you to feel much more equipped to give good feedback – at work, at home and anywhere else you choose.

## **PART 1**

What is feedback and  
why does it matter?

This section acts as an introduction to the concept of feedback, offering an easy-to-read digest of popular models, beliefs and opinions about feedback.

First, though, consider what the term “feedback” means to you. Grab a pen and a bit of paper, ready to make a few notes. Then have a think about it in these two situations.

1. Your personal experience of receiving feedback (from school, parents, friends, even enemies)  
What examples do you have? Can you remember the earliest piece of feedback you received?
2. Your experience of receiving feedback at work  
What different experiences of feedback have you had at different jobs? Any inspirational supportive feedback or truly awful comments that were intended to be helpful? What organisational feedback systems have you had to navigate? What impact have they had on you and your team?

Then, as you start reading, you will be able to compare my definition of feedback with the way you have experienced feedback in your home life and in your working life. You can then explore the theory behind feedback, consider the power it has and understand why it matters to do it well.

Practical stories and examples will help you reflect on your own experience and make sense of the theory.

The section also introduces my model for giving good feedback. This will provide:

- a process for you to gather your thoughts when considering feedback conversations
- an easy way of structuring feedback, linked to observable behaviours.

Used properly, this model will also act as an antidote to any complications you may experience when trying to give good feedback at work.

Are you ready? Then we'll begin. It starts with a story.

Of course it does. Everything to do with feedback starts with a story.

# 1

## What is feedback?

“Feedback is the breakfast of champions.”

Ken Blanchard<sup>1</sup>

After scooting down the hill from his villa in Spain to his shared workspace on the beach, Mike Jones glanced at the flyer offering remote coaching sessions on how to give good feedback.

He was glad to have left the corporate rat race so that he didn't have to bother about things like how to give good feedback anymore. After years working in banks, he and a childhood friend, Elliot, had decided to set up their own business, providing data to guide banks on their environmental, social and governance obligations. They believed in the value of their product and were doing well. Life was good.

Then Elliot (on Zoom) said something about Mike being slow with a marketing spec. He followed this up with something that Mike thought didn't sound like Elliot at all. “I want to be honest and candid with you, Mike. This has had an impact. Sales figures are down.”

Suddenly life didn't feel quite so good. The words “honest” and “candid” always meant trouble, in Mike's experience. He

sat up straighter and swallowed. “Hang on, a minute,” he said. “Is that feedback?”

He grabbed a notebook and pen and looked expectantly at the camera.

Elliot fiddled with his own pen for a minute. Then he said, “No, mate, I’m just saying sales have dropped fifty per cent.”

“Oh, right,” said Mike, putting his pen down and relaxing again. No feedback. It was OK.

It took him a few minutes to recover from the shock of potentially having been given feedback by his partner. Then he thought: did Elliot say something about sales being fifty per cent down? How come?

## **No escape from feedback**

Even without the impetus of poor sales, the pressure to give feedback seems as impossible to outrun as the original Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

On a recent morning, I was asked to rate my experience of a hotel website, comment on my ticket-buying experience with a train company, fill in a questionnaire about a medical service and give stars to a couple of purchases on Amazon that I have no memory of making. I also spent an anxious hour reviewing social media posts about a new creative project, worried about the number of likes and was distracted by comments on my work from people I have never met and have no interest in.

I imagine that, like me, you get bombarded with requests for feedback after making even minimal use of any kind of service or product. If not today, at least some time this week.

Then there is always the risk of receiving an avalanche of feedback in return. Feedback on your feedback, in other words.

LinkedIn, for example, offers me a weekly feedback summary detailing the number of comments and likes on my posts, ending with a tantalising comment, something like “and your profile has been viewed four times this week, Margaret! Click here to find out more about your viewers.” Tantalising, because finding out more involves not just clicking but also paying more and installing some extra feature.

Happily, I can avoid this particular feedback; all I have to do is not pay. It is not as easy to avoid elsewhere. Like it or not, it seems that feedback plays a critical role everywhere in our world, both personally and professionally.

You might therefore conclude that I could make a leap of faith and assume that you now know all there is to know about what feedback looks like. So starting with a chapter headed “What is feedback?” might seem strange.

But carry out any kind of survey – a Google search, a review of academic literature, or even mention that you are writing a book about feedback to your friends – and you will find that the word “feedback” prompts an enormous range of comments and experiences. These often go on for a long time, detailing varied, complex (and, on occasion, frankly traumatic) feedback experiences and quandaries.

As a result, before I start looking in detail at how to give good feedback at work, I feel I should alert you to one of the sacred tenets of feedback. This is that good feedback involves good communication. And just because the term “feedback” is a big part of our world, this does not mean that:

- we all have the same understanding and expectations of that activity, or
- that we feel comfortable about doing it, or

- that we all do it in the same way.

So, in the spirit of modelling good communication skills, when I use the term “feedback”, let me first explain what I mean.

## What is feedback?

If you look through a dictionary you will find several definitions for “feedback”, with example sentences showing how you can use the word. Some are more helpful than others. The online *Cambridge Dictionary* includes:

“Jimi Hendrix loved to fling his guitar around to get weird and wonderful sounds from the feedback.”

“Feedback from the sensors ensures that the car engine runs smoothly.”

“Have you had any feedback from the customers about the new soap?”

And then we have the following definition taken from Google’s English dictionary (provided by Oxford Languages):

**feedback** *noun* (opinion) Information about reactions to a product, a person’s performance of a task, etc. which is used as a basis for improvement.

If you like to make notes as you read, you might want to write down the three points, next to this last definition of feedback. These are:

- information
- opinion
- reactions.

These are all critical for you to bear in mind as you explore more about what the term “feedback” actually means.

Giving feedback is a basic human skill, based on the ability to communicate. When you give feedback, you are simply communicating information, your opinion about and reactions to something someone has done. Elliot, for example, was trying to communicate his view that Mike’s slow production of the marketing spec had had a direct impact on sales.

As humans, we are social creatures. We are always communicating, whether we do it consciously or not. So giving and receiving feedback is something we do all the time, whether we are aware of it or not.

The key message of this book is:

**Feedback is always about communication. In a simple communication loop, it’s the thing that closes that loop so that you know your message has been received and (hopefully) understood.**

It starts right at the beginning, when you are trying to acquire all the skills you need to get through life.

## **Learning through communication**

To acquire any life skills, you have to be able to learn.

Take motor skills – walking, for example. As a child, you learn to walk by trying it out, falling over and trying again. If you are lucky, your learning is enhanced by having friendly adults around to encourage you as you develop this basic skill.

“Three more steps! Keep going! Well done.”

The same friendly adults might then go on to give you more

detailed feedback about the impact of more nuanced behaviour, such as the tantrum you have later.

“Screaming hurts my ears! Use your words!”

Once you can “use your words”, you learn that it is more efficient to ask for what you want instead of just pointing and yelling. It’s better to explain how you feel, rather than stamp and scream.

You have learnt this social construct largely because of the feedback communicated to you from those around you. This process continues as you grow up.

## **Learning through feedback**

There are many different theories about how we learn. David Kolb’s experiential learning theory helps explain the link between feedback and learning in more detail.

Kolb described the process for good learning in the following steps.<sup>2</sup>

1. **The learner has a concrete experience** (a new experience or a reinterpretation of an existing experience).
  - In our tantrum example, this is when an adult puts their hands over their ears and says, “Stop screaming, use your words.”
  - In Elliot and Mike’s example, the fall in sales means they need to do something differently. Elliot tries giving Mike feedback about his contribution to this situation.
2. **The learner reflects and observes the new experience** (any inconsistencies between experience and understanding are particularly important).

- You might think about the adult's reaction to your tantrum and wonder about the difference between this and their reaction to when you smile and wave at them in the supermarket.
  - Mike wonders about the drop in sales and why Elliot is talking to him like that.
3. **The learner has new ideas as a result** (abstract conceptualisation, where reflection gives rise to the new idea or modification to an existing abstract concept).
- You think about new ways to get what you want instead of using your previous approach of screaming.
  - Mike realises that Elliot is trying to give him feedback. For the first time he and Elliot consider that they need to learn different ways to communicate to keep their business going.
4. **The learner actively experiments** (applying these ideas to the world about them to see the results).
- You try using your words, by saying, "Please may I have that biscuit?" You find that this results in your mother smiling and giving you a biscuit. You decide to try this approach again in future.
  - Mike and Elliot practise different ways of communicating. Once they are able to offer each other feedback (following their "giving good feedback" coaching), their sales start to improve.

And so you learn to develop your use of words, your communication skills, even if this is initially only to get what you want in life. This early form of feedback closes the loop for

you, in the same way that falling over does when you start to walk. And this learning continues throughout your life, as you build personal and business relationships and learn new skills.

For example, learning the skills required to develop and grow a business. In their new role as business owners, Elliot and Mike's long history has acted as both a hindrance and a help. They are comfortable with each other but are not used to challenging each other or asking too many questions. As business partners, they have to learn to communicate in a different way. This means giving each other feedback about the impact their behaviours have, both on each other and on the work they need to do for their business. Their sales will not improve until they have learnt to give each other good feedback.

Kolb developed his ideas into an experiential learning cycle, shown in Figure 1.

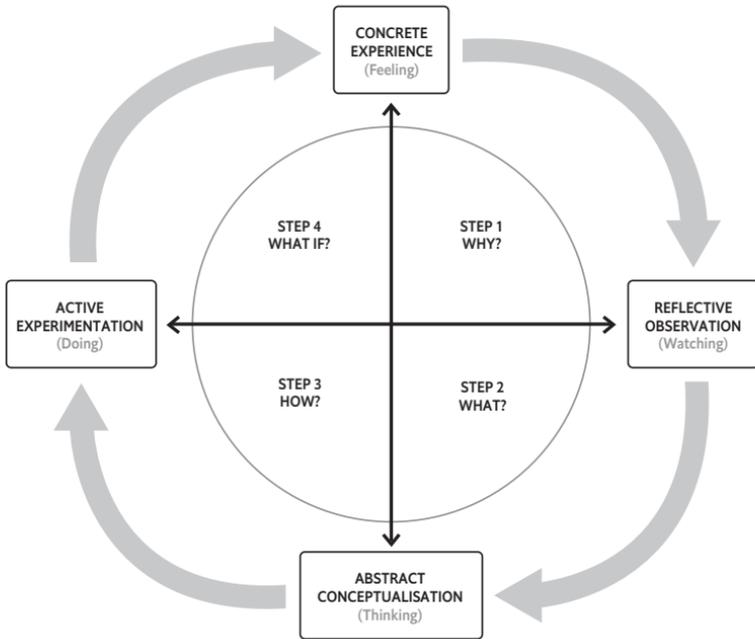
As you go through life and learn from many diverse experiences, you will move around this experiential cycle again and again, trying a different strategy for each situation.

## **Feedback at work**

Once you have made it into the world of work, the reward on offer for any accomplishments will be a salary instead of biscuits. But to continue learning, you will still need other people to tell you the impact that you and your behaviour have on them and on the work you are doing together.

If you are lucky, the feedback you get at work will be helpful and supportive, encouraging you round this experiential learning cycle. If you are unfortunate, you will encounter at least one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, together with all their limitations.

## What is feedback?



**Figure 1.** David Kolb's experiential learning cycle<sup>3</sup>

But therapeutic though it might be for me to tut at their feedback reluctance, the four horsemen are not that unusual. If you are completely honest with yourself, might you be perfectly happy to put two stars on an Amazon review to rate a disappointing purchase? Then, when asked for feedback in your workplace, you find you share the same feelings as our four horsemen? That is, you would prefer to put off giving (and receiving) feedback at work for ever?

You are not alone. Many people are the opposite of comfortable in giving feedback; many otherwise capable people panic when they are required to give feedback in person

in the world of work. Part of the reason is because feedback is so often an organisational requirement, headed by a specialist department such as human resources or talent management and labelled with a great big capital F. That capital F stands for a prescribed activity: Giving Feedback at Work.

This specialist department will probably run helpful training sessions, explaining that Giving Feedback at Work is an important part of your role. When Giving Feedback at Work, you must be objective, there are competency frameworks to refer to, job descriptions and ranking information to consult.<sup>4</sup> You might also be required to link your feedback with ratings, 360 processes<sup>5</sup> and appraisal processes.<sup>6</sup>

And now, as Mike succinctly put it, referring to his corporate life before Spain, the great big capital F in Giving Feedback at Work just stands for great big fat Fail.

This is because, whatever the limitations of these processes, you will be forced to use them. Your team members will probably want to argue about your decision to rate them with 3 instead of 4, or see themselves as worthy of being described as an over-achiever rather than an under-achiever. They may also ask for your comments about their possible progress to a promotion, or insist they want to be told where they stand.

A senior manager once told me she had booked herself onto a two-week conference in Washington simply because the title of one half-hour talk appealed. It was called “Ouch! That hurt! The neurobiology of feedback!” At the time, the organisation was developing its 360-degree feedback process and the experience had been painful for all concerned.

None of this has anything to do with helpful feedback, of course. It is also quite a lot to handle, on top of your day job.

Carrying the weight of all these Giving Feedback at Work expectations, many people shy away from giving feedback at all, feeling it is best to play it safe and say as little as possible, as blandly as possible. Or like the four horsemen, just pass this whole Giving Feedback at Work business back to the human resources or talent management department. After all, it was their idea in the first place.

However, it does not have to be like this. Let's go back to our original question.

## **What is feedback #2?**

All these systems, appraisals, competency frameworks, ratings and missives from human resources departments are red herrings when trying to understand what feedback is.

Remember: giving feedback is a natural human activity, something we all do as part of our communication with each other. By the time you start work and become confused by organisational labelling, you will have received many kinds of feedback.

What did you note down when thinking about your personal experiences of feedback before starting to read this chapter? I imagine most of those feedback experiences did not come with a big label, signalling Feedback. You may just have had a warm glow when a parent noticed and appreciated something you did, a sense of unfairness if a teacher criticised you for something you did not do, or felt demotivated by a disappointing test result that did not reward you for your hard work.

Now you are grown up, a simple communication loop with your life partner or flatmate may involve communicating how you feel about a particular behaviour (for example, cooking a

lovely meal, helping or not helping to clear up), the impact of this on you (for example, it makes you feel appreciated/looked after/annoyed), and what you would like to happen instead (for example, share tasks or take turns).

As you build your relationship, practise your communication skills and learn to navigate your way round the barriers, you will each begin to notice the times when the other is more receptive, the sort of comments they respond to, the sort of tasks they enjoy and the ones they need more support with. You will both adapt your communication accordingly. At this point, you are both learning to give good feedback.

You are, however, unlikely to sit down with each other and develop a complex system, detailing the standards of vacuuming and menu choices expected, in order to facilitate an annual evaluation of your individual contributions to the cleaning or cooking activities of the household.

The reality is that no one improves their feedback-giving skills by focusing on systems and processes. In fact, if you try, you will end up giving feedback that can be at best unhelpful and at worst actively damaging. Once a natural human activity has been labelled with a capital letter and turned into a system, it can seem impossibly complex.

This is unfortunate. Your need for feedback at work is just as critical to your development and growth as your need for feedback at home. At work, feedback remains a crucial tool for helping people understand their impact on others and supporting their development. Forward-looking constructive feedback helps you and your team learn and move round the learning circle described by Kolb, via the key steps of experience, observation, reflection and practice.

So, for example, when a meeting goes well or goes completely off track, feedback is the way you communicate to your colleague:

- what you saw them doing (for example, talking over the client, when they tried to make a point)
- the impact these actions had on you
- the impact you think these actions had on other people
- the resulting impact you think these actions had on the outcome of the meeting.

In theory, this should mean that giving feedback is straightforward. In practice, of course, no one finds it easy.

For this reason, as well as offering courses on giving feedback, many companies offer communication skills courses. These can be extremely helpful. However, in linking communication to feedback at work, there are two models of communication that are useful to consider. One is from the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle<sup>7</sup> and the other is from communications theorist David Berlo.<sup>8</sup>

Aristotle's model puts the speaker at the centre of any communication, responsible for the result and the impact on the audience. Most organisations that are trying to support their managers to improve their feedback-giving skills follow Aristotle's communication model.

All the emphasis for the success of the feedback message is placed on the speaker (i.e. the feedback giver) rather than the audience (i.e. the person receiving the feedback). As a result, training at work will generally focus on offering the feedback giver a variety of feedback giving tips and techniques to adapt the message for the occasion, to achieve maximum effect with

the audience. If we have a difficult piece of feedback to impart, we spend a lot of time planning our message, hoping that the person we are giving feedback to will get the point.

This is, of course, important; the feedback we give will have an impact.

But good feedback is not just a matter of *what* that feedback is about; it also needs to focus on *how* it is given: that is, not just focusing on the message, but also on the way we talk to the person, how we react and adapt our communication as the discussion progresses.

Berlo pays more attention to the state of the receiver when completing a communication loop. In terms of feedback, you may have all the right elements to put together the message – you can be very well prepared, have gathered perfect examples, expressed yourself clearly, respectfully and helpfully, used exactly the right sort of language. Yet still the message may not land correctly. In this case, you need to think a bit more about the channel and the receiver.

The key message here is that **feedback is as much about the person receiving the message as it is about the person giving it**. There can be a whole range of reasons why the person may not be able to receive that feedback well. These are just as important to consider as developing your own skills and techniques.

The closing of a communication loop generally involves putting yourself in the other person's shoes. This is something we might understand in other types of communication, but when giving one-to-one feedback at work, it's often forgotten. So, thinking back to the definition of feedback (on page 14), it is important to remember that feedback will always involve two people.

## **Feedback at work #2**

One of the reasons we forget this simple message is that there can be other peculiar things going on in the work environment. For example, providing or processing feedback remotely can make this natural process feel a little strange. As remote working has increased and global management roles become the norm in many industries, there has been a corresponding rise in the number of people who find it hard to process feedback remotely.

An Australian client of mine, Andy, called, reeling with shock. He had been summoned to a Zoom meeting at the end of his working day and threatened with dismissal. Brian, his manager, told him his contract would be closed “due to ongoing poor attitude” unless he changed his ways immediately.

“What poor attitude?” Andy wanted to know.

“The one you have consistently had feedback about for the last two years,” said Brian.

Andy had no idea what he was talking about. He had had a few Zoom chats with Brian, sure, good conversations he thought, shooting the breeze. How was he supposed to know he was being given feedback? It didn’t come with a label.

Andy listened to Brian in disbelief. He was thinking, “It’s not like you know anything about my actual job or my day-to-day work. You are only the manager because you suck up to the managing director. I keep the Australian office going. I know what needs doing, what works, what doesn’t. What would you be giving me feedback about exactly? Who do you think you are? My boss?”

Then Brian took him by surprise, saying frostily, “None of us likes working with someone with your attitude – the one

you're demonstrating at the moment, in the disrespectful way you just spoke to me."

Too late, Andy realised he had spoken his thoughts out loud. (He tells me he always says what he thinks. He thought Brian and his other colleagues liked it. He's pretty sure none of them have ever told him they don't. Or if they did, Andy thought they were joking and didn't take them seriously.)

What should he do now, Andy wanted to know. How was he supposed to learn a different attitude at his age? It was easy for Brian to say it was disrespectful. What did that mean, anyway?

Unknown to Andy, however, Brian was also calling me for help. He was a relatively new manager, with a lot of responsibilities. On the same day that he spoke to Andy, he also had to tell an experienced team leader in Cape Town, via a flickering screen, that he wasn't meeting his targets, give a young consultant in Sydney feedback on her selling skills, and articulate to a recently promoted assistant in Delhi what their likely progress through the company would be.

He was painfully aware that they all expected different things from him when they asked for feedback. He knew some members of his team were looking for him to help them build self-esteem or gain empowerment. Others expected ideas on how they could build on what they thought they had already done brilliantly. Then there was Andy, to whom feedback seemed to be the equivalent of water off a duck's back – it just seemed to roll off him, without making so much as a dent in his enormous ego.

Brian quite reasonably wondered how on earth he was supposed to give feedback in this strange new world where

there were already so many complications, let alone how he might translate any of it into good feedback.

Brian put off the conversation with Andy about his attitude because he found it uncomfortable to talk to someone who seemed so confident, and he found it even harder over Zoom. Elliot put off his conversation with Mike because he didn't want to upset his friend by suggesting that their poor sales were down to him.

We will talk about this more in later chapters. However, both men were doing their colleagues a disservice. Feedback for their colleagues would have been helpful. They just weren't quite sure where to start. And, as we have already explored, once a natural human activity has been labelled and treated as a corporate process, it can seem much more complex. Even more so if it is delivered via a computer screen.

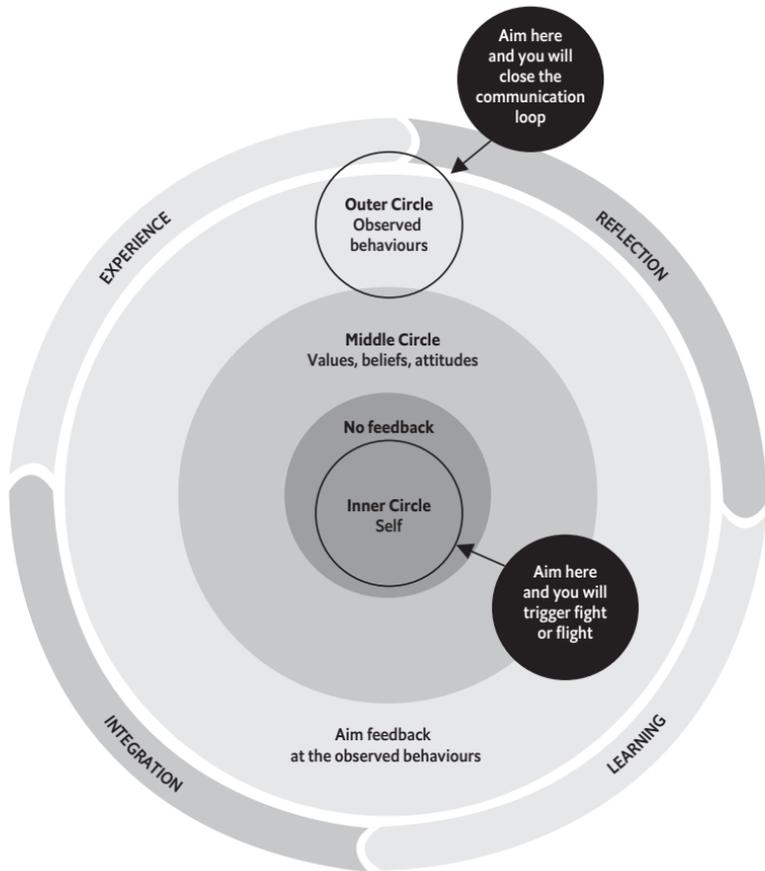
But the good news for Brian, Elliot and for you is that it is possible to keep the process of giving (and receiving) feedback at work both simple and useful. All you need to do is to rethink how you plan, deliver and question it. The giving good feedback framework, with no capital letters, is here to help.

## **The giving good feedback framework**

Figure 2 shows what giving good feedback should be about.<sup>9</sup> The focus is on observed behaviours and the aim is to help people work round the four stages of Kolb's learning circle.

When you get confused by the whole process, remember that these rating and appraisal systems are not important. What is important is being able to give and receive *good feedback*.

That is, you need to be able to communicate what you



**Figure 2.** The giving good feedback framework

observe about people's behaviours and the impact of this behaviour on you and on the work you have to produce.

And, for your own development, you also need to be able to hear and understand the impact of the way you behave on your boss, your colleagues and the work you are producing together.

When you give (or receive) feedback at work, you are simply building on the communications skills you have been using in all other areas of your life.

You need to be able to do this in a way that supports people to move round the learning circle. When you receive feedback, you need to be able to ask enough questions to get the information you need to move to the next step.

The giving good feedback framework therefore focuses feedback on the behaviours people can see and change (the outer circle) rather than challenging their values, beliefs and attitudes (the middle circle) or commenting on people's personality and self-esteem (the inner circle).

As a result, it avoids the classic feedback problem of triggering a defensive reaction. Instead, it helps people to move round the circle via the key steps of experience, reflection, learning and integration, thus supporting progress and learning.

## **Remember**

Feedback is always about communication. In a simple communication loop, it's the thing that closes that loop so that you know your message has been received and (hopefully) understood.

Communication is a skill we have been practising since the day we were born.

The more we understand what feedback really is, the more we'll feel comfortable about it and the more we'll improve at giving it.

Read on to learn more about why feedback really matters and learn new techniques for giving good feedback at work. But

remember, it is always best to keep a simple, natural, human activity just that – simple.

In summary, feedback is:

- a natural human activity
- an activity we are all involved in, all the time, consciously and unconsciously
- an activity that should focus on things that go well, rather than only on things that go wrong
- an activity that should support learning
- always about clear, helpful, respectful communication between people, not just about process and systems. It is always focused on observed behaviours that the person can do something about.

## 2

# Why does feedback matter?

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a millennial in possession of a job must be in want of feedback.”

Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall<sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, I supported a client who had been in a new job for a few weeks. The new job was career progression for Priya, involving her in daily decisions about how best to resource a big department store. It was a long-awaited dream. But after only a few weeks, she was considering leaving and asking her previous employer to take her back. Why?

Priya described her first day. She had been thrown straight in at the deep end, running the staff resourcing meeting. At the end of the meeting, she felt she had done well. At least, she felt she had got through the meeting without disgracing herself and she had some ideas of what she could do better next time.

“Sit down”, the boss said, “and we will give you some feedback.”

Priya noticed three other staff managers sitting with the boss. All four went through Priya’s handling of the meeting in some detail. They commented on Priya’s presenting style (too quiet), her method of asking for staff (not assertive), her manner