

FEEDFORWARD INSTEAD OF FEEDBACK

Providing feedback has long been considered to be an essential skill for leaders.

But there is a fundamental problem with all types of feedback: it focuses on the past, on what has already occurred, not on the infinite variety of opportunities that can happen in the future. As such, feedback can be limited & static, as opposed to expansive & dynamic.

Here are 7 reasons why feedforward can often be more useful than feedback as a developmental tool.

1. We can change the future. We can't change the past. Feedforward helps people envision & focus on a positive future, not a failed past. Athletes are often trained using feedforward. Race car drivers are taught to, "Look at the road ahead, not at the wall." Basketball players are taught to envision the ball going in the hoop & to imagine the perfect shot. By giving people ideas on how they can be even more successful (as opposed to visualising a failed past), we can increase their chances of achieving this success in the future.

2. It is more productive to help people learn to be "right," than prove they were "wrong." Negative feedback often becomes an exercise in "let me prove you were wrong." **Feedback tends to produce defensiveness on the part of the receiver & discomfort on the part of the sender.** Even constructively delivered feedback is often seen as negative as it necessarily involves a discussion of mistakes, shortfalls, & problems. Feedforward, on the other hand, is almost always seen as positive because it focuses on solutions—not problems.

3. Feedforward is especially suited to successful people. Successful people like getting ideas that are aimed at helping them achieve their goals. They tend to resist negative judgment. We all tend to accept feedback that is consistent with the way we see ourselves. **People tend to reject or deny feedback that is inconsistent with the way we see ourselves.** Successful people tend to have a very positive self-image.

4. People do not take feedforward as personally as feedback. In theory, constructive feedback is supposed to “focus on the performance, not the person.” In practice, almost all feedback is taken personally (no matter how it is delivered).

Successful people’s sense of identity is highly connected with their work. The more successful people are, the more this tends to be true. It is hard to give a dedicated professional feedback that is not taken personally. Feedforward cannot involve a personal critique, since it is discussing something that has not yet happened. Positive suggestions tend to be seen as objective advice—personal critiques are often viewed as personal attacks.

5. Feedback reinforces personal stereotyping & negative self-fulfilling prophecies. Feedforward reinforces the possibility of change. Feedback reinforces the feeling of failure. How many of us have been “helped” by a spouse, significant other, or friend, who seems to have a near-photographic memory of our previous “sins” that they share with us in order to point out the history of our shortcomings. Negative feedback can be used to reinforce the message, “this is just the way you are.” **Feedforward is based on the assumption that the receiver of suggestions can make positive changes in the future.**

6. Most managers avoid giving feedback. Most managers are not very good at giving negative feedback. It is unlikely that this will change in the near future.

7. Feedforward tends to be much faster & more efficient than feedback. Successful people tend to have a high need for self-determination & will tend to accept ideas that they “buy” while rejecting ideas that feel “forced” upon them. With this approach almost no time gets wasted on judging the quality of the ideas or “proving that the ideas are wrong”. During feedback, this “debate” time is usually negative; it can take up a lot of time, & it is often not very productive. By eliminating judgment of the ideas, the process becomes much more positive for the sender, as well as the receiver.

By using feedforward, owners can dramatically improve the quality of communication in their SMEs, ensuring that the right message is conveyed, & that those who receive it are receptive to its content. The result is a much more dynamic, much more open SME, one whose employees focus on the promise of the future rather than dwelling on the mistakes of the past.