Notes on Feedback and Continuous Improvement

How do we know we are successful in our endeavors? More importantly, how do we find out if we could be more successful? The essence of continuous improvement is feedback, and it comes in a broad range of colors and tones. Strategies for optimizing each type of feedback are essential for maintaining focus on achievement and fulfillment.

The Range of Feedback

Feedback is the circulatory system of any project, plan, or organization. Feedback makes it possible for current strategies and designs to respond intelligently to change, both inside and outside the project. As soon as any project begins, the very act of starting it affects the world around it, producing subtle changes in the environment and the people implementing it. With each step of progress, everything continues to change, sometimes in dramatic ways. Feedback is the mechanism that makes success possible, because it allows us to maintain a direct course to the goal, and supports adaptation to the endless processes of change.

In essence, *feedback is any input that comes to us in response to our actions*.

In purely mechanical activities, feedback is diverse, but relatively simple — the bolts aren't tight enough, the drawer doesn't fit, the tabletop needs more sanding, the color is unpopular, the chair is too low, and so on. But in human endeavors feedback takes many more forms, some of which carry significant emotional baggage, and some of which may trigger counter-productive responses. Ideally, all feedback "messages" should prompt us to make an improvement in some aspect of our activities, but unless we become familiar with the full spectrum of feedback possibilities, and learn how to process them creatively, we will miss vital messages from our environment, at the expense of further developing our own skills in action.

There is an infinite variety of feedback, as unbounded as the range of human endeavor, but certain broad categories are easy to recognize.

Consider an author with a rough first draft of her novel. She sends it to three people: her friendly cousin, a literature professor from her college days, and a book editor who might approve her manuscript for publication.

From her cousin, she's likely to receive praise and encouragement, perhaps including some

specifics that could improve the book. But since it's a rough draft, much of this feedback may be disingenuous, hiding the cousin's displeasure at all the clumsy sentences, disorganized chapters, misspelled words, grammatical errors, inaccuracies, and so on.

From her former professor, she may receive a scathing list of all the mistakes and inept paragraphs, a terse condemnation for the unprofessional state of the manuscript, and a suggestion to seek another line of work.

From the professional editor, who is familiar with rough drafts, and who recognizes that any book must go through many iterations before it's ready for publication, she may receive vital insight into the overall structure of the work, pointers for improving weak sections, and a few specific corrections for habitual grammatical gaffs. The emotional feedback is likely to be generally encouraging, with no need for judgment or condemnation.

An inexperienced author might read the cousin's feedback as proof that she's going in the right direction, the professor's feedback as proof that she's incompetent and shouldn't even be writing a novel, and the editor's feedback as proof that she can indeed realize her goals if she keeps working on the book.

Essentially, feedback is only relevant if it is "actionable." That is, the message is useful if we can use it to find some way to improve what we're doing. "Great!" isn't actionable, because it only tells us that someone liked something — perhaps just the small section that was read, or perhaps the title, or perhaps the author herself and not the book at all. Spelling errors aren't actionable when writing a book — their relevance emerges only at the very end of the project.

But imagine if this author had sent her manuscript to someone who has despised her since high school. In this case the feedback might be well crafted and vituperative, designed to put her off her game and give up, while also making her feel as miserable as possible. Might there be some valid points buried in the vitriol? Of course, but this isn't very actionable unless it is clearly discernible in the arch enemy's malevolent diatribe.

Types of Feedback

Friendly support / affirmation

This kind of feedback is usually pleasant, and it may confer some energy to continue with our work, but its main value depends upon knowing something about the person providing it. If it comes from friends and relatives, its emotional value is moderate, and the validity of any specifics is likely to be sparse. If it comes from respected experts in the field, its emotional impact might be much greater, but any specifics are probably worthy of close attention. If it comes from someone utterly unfamiliar with the material, it may be impossible to gain anything from it but mild satisfaction.

Objective data

This kind of feedback is rare, hard to obtain, and often even more difficult to evaluate. The number of comments on a social media post, for example, can mean almost anything: the author is famous or popular, the post was controversial or struck a common nerve, the majority of posts may be "likes" or condemnations but reflect no evidence that the post was actually understood, the post may have triggered an automated comment-bot, and so on. Book sales, on the other hand, are a valid measure of the value placed on the book by the reading public. Of course, if the publisher hired an entire mailing list to buy the book on the same day, and to post positive reviews on Amazon, such data (though technically objective) is entirely meaningless in its interpretation.

Insightful evaluation

One hopes that experts and people with real knowledge of the subject will provide carefully thought out contributions to the aim of the project in question. This is likely to be the best kind of feedback, but it is also prey to professional habits and values that may prevent experts from seeing new ideas or appreciating novel approaches. Unfortunately, such feedback is often misinterpreted because of its accompanying emotional impact on the recipient.

Vague assessments & Generalizations (good or bad)

These are perhaps the most common form of casual feedback, and are generally of little value, but unfortunately they still often carry a considerable amount of emotional weight. A quick scan of product reviews on Amazon shows that the majority of comments say little more than "I liked it," or "One star because the packaging was terrible." A grade-school book report is a great example of vague assessments and generalizations, and it's hard to imagine an author learning anything from it that could contradict sales figures. The problem with vague assessments is that they often sound like insightful evaluation if they aren't viewed with an objective, even skeptical, eye. "Great!" does not mean anything in its own right; if accompanied by hundreds of additional Greats, it still means almost nothing other than that a lot of people were motivated to voice approval — of what, exactly, we may not know — while not offering anything actually useful. Looking deeper, this may not even constitute positive feedback at all.

Attacks / denials

Hostility is itself an important, and all too common, form of feedback. It may be justified in certain extreme situations, but generally it reflects a breakdown of communication on one side or the other. As a form of feedback, hostility achieves little more than to put the recipient on the defensive and further diminish positive outcomes. But the existence of attack feedback carries at least one important message: something about the project or system is provoking unhappiness, anger, frustration, and the like. This may be due only to the condition of the attacker, but usually it points to something that could be improved on both sides, and for this reason it should not be summarily dismissed.

Manipulation (good or bad)

Feedback is sometimes well disguised, perhaps as part of a strategy to influence a program or project without arousing attention. Manipulative feedback can be helpful or destructive. When a mobster remarks, "You've got such a lovely home," it veils an arson threat. The innocent comment, "What an unusual hairdo" is really more of a suggestion than a compliment, and it might be more helpful than a direct assertion that the hairdo looks bizarre and will likely bring embarrassment.

Constructive criticism

The word "criticize" has lost most of its subtler meaning. Merriam-Webster's first definition is "to consider the merits and demerits of...." and gives "evaluate" as a synonym. The second definition is "... to point out the faults of." But even these definitions fall short of how the word is now used. When we say "A criticized B," we don't mean A evaluated B in any rational way; we mean that A belittled B, insulted B, demeaned B, etc. Consequently, Dictionary.com and others rank these definitions in the reverse order. In the context of feedback, however, the intent of the word is simply to evaluate, and it derives from the Greek word for *discern*, to see clearly. In the end, the phrase "constructive criticism" is redundant, since "to criticize" already refers to discerning discriminative observation. We're compelled to add "constructive" to avoid the more recent implication of merely "disapproving" of something. (Even in the arts, a "critic" is at least *supposed* to be one who evaluates the pros and cons of a work or performance, not someone who just expresses distaste, although a critic dwelling on what he doesn't like probably garners more clicks.)

Antagonistic criticism

We might also call this "unconstructive" criticism. It refers to the more recent sense of the word, in which the feedback is intended mainly to degrade, deprecate, and diminish the validity of whatever is being criticized. The key to differentiating antagonistic criticism from constructive criticism is to consider the difference between "criticism" and "to criticize." The unfortunate similarity of these words, one a noun and the other a verb, makes it far too easy to classify all criticism as messages that criticize.

Positivity and Negativity

It's all too easy to classify feedback as being of only two kinds — positive or negative — but this over-simplification leads to a dangerous trap. Constructive criticism is likely to incorporate suggestions for change, and any change can be viewed as a negative judgment of the present state. This clearly is not "negativity" if the change in question leads to greater success. Similarly, gratuitous reinforcement of the status quo is not "positivity" if the status quo is failing to solve relevant problems. Pointing out the problems is not "negativity" if they are not already clearly seen by the director of the project. When this perfunctory reduction of feedback into positive or negative, good or bad, friendly or antagonistic, is used in response to feedback, it usually represents a defensive or insecure posture, a reaction to some emotional component in the feedback messages, or failure of insight into how

a system or operation actually works. To guard against this kind of reactionary response, feedback needs to be unpacked, separating the emotional messages from the practical ones, as we discuss in the next section.

Social Media

Social media represent a special, unprecedented opportunity for feedback. When we post a statement, feedback comes in the form of comments from our audience, but it often includes comments from many who are not our intended audience, or comments that were written hastily and without much thought of being helpful. Some comments may be harsh and unsupportive, not at all intended to help or improve. Other comments may directly support or agree with what we originally posted. For many, the value of social media feedback is lost in its sheer volume and diversity. Its applicability may also be dubious for other reasons:

> It's relatively random, and isn't really connected to what we're trying to accomplish.
>
> It's unplanned and ad hoc, each comment arising in a flow of other comments, possibly not even relating to the original posting.
>
> It's fundamentally disingenuous, because many comments come from those who just want to make you feel good, or from those who prefer to goad, or challenge, or merely deny what they may think you represent.

While the collection of comments following a social media post is indeed one form of feedback, it's not a very promising format for refining our thinking, clarifying our expressions, evaluating our current positions and strategies, or making plans for the future. One might use it for those purposes, but great skill would be required to avoid being grossly misled.

Social media feedback illustrates the extremes of feedback messaging, and the inherent danger of giving unwarranted weight to unstructured, relatively random information sources. Social media represent an environment expressly designed to generate excessive feedback, an environment unlikely to produce much "actionable" input we can obtain from real projects, enterprise, and productive activity.

What Is Feedback For?

The purpose of feedback is the continuous improvement of a project, design, strategy, or system. Without feedback, the creator of a project or design is essentially flying blind, or at least without making use of all available intelligence. Ultimately, nature itself is the prime source of all feedback, and therefore every message contains something useful, something worth learning, about the project or system in question. A vital skill in making the best use of feedback is understanding that feedback *always* embodies multiple messages, of many types.

The various types of feedback messages convey at least two *dimensions* of influence — practical and emotional.

Feedback that's encouraging can stimulate creative energy; feedback that's discouraging can stifle creativity; practical feedback can improve performance or interfere with it. For this reason, it's important to consider both the practical and the emotional ranges of the

feedback spectrum. Practical messages can get lost if the message also contains contrasting emotional content. Messages of positive energy can be overshadowed by seemingly contradictory practical content.

This caution applies both to the sender of feedback and to the recipient. If the feedback is deliberate — that is, if it's not just a set of tick-boxes on an automated survey form — then the sender should consider offering only one dimension per message. Sincere praise or condemnation, without any attempt to provide guidance and specific steps, will have more impact than a mixture of emotional and practical. Well thought-out practical suggestions, on the other hand, will be more likely to help if they are not mixed up with other messages in the emotional dimension.

If we review the main types of feedback listed above, it's easy to see how counterproductive some of them would be, and how easily the director of a strategy or system might be misled or distracted by certain types. But whatever one's role in a project, one must at least attempt to separate the various types of feedback contained in any particular message. Antagonistic criticism may well contain vital elements of constructive input, hidden beneath the emotional baggage. Attempted manipulation may be inspired by real insight into flaws in the project itself. Even friendly support may be motivated by a deep misunderstanding of the real purpose of the system being supported.

Without continuous feedback, and a wise determination to apply all that it has to offer, plans, projects, operations, strategies, systems, etc., are *unlikely to improve*. As circumstances change, full utilization of feedback is essential to ensure that the system in question can survive, persevere, and even thrive. Continuous improvement depends on feedback, throughout natural systems and all human endeavor.

Further Explorations

Constructive Criticism Definition

"Constructive criticism is providing feedback in a manner that acknowledges both the positives and where there is room for improvement instead of solely focusing on the negatives. The focus of providing constructive criticism is offering useful advice that can be implemented for better results. Some might view constructive criticism as a form of positive feedback.

"The ability to provide constructive criticism is considered a leadership skill. It is said to motivate people instead of causing people to lose morale because of negative feedback. This is because properly delivered constructive criticism focuses on future improvement instead of on current wrongs. The person giving feedback offers clear steps on what can be done differently so that the person receiving feedback has a starting point for betterment. This is the vital difference with plain criticism. Giving criticism that only points out the negatives does not offer the receiver a guiding point on how to improve. Thus, negative criticism is less effective in reaching better results. Giving constructive criticism yields faster improved results than negative criticism because the receiver is given specifics on what needs to change and how to change it. A good leader will be able to use constructive criticism to

carry the team forward."

From BusinessTerms.org.

Giving, Seeking, and Using Feedback for Performance Improvement

Here's a whole (free) PDF book on the subject, Job Feedback, by Manuel London, from a psychological perspective. There is a great deal of sensible advice throughout.

An Introduction to Continuous Improvement

This blog post offers a simple and concise overview of the Continuous Improvement "movement" that has influenced businesses and organizations around the world. It's based on feedback loops that are intentionally designed into the system.

Arguing as Exchange of Feedback

In this PBS short video Adam Grant describes a simple self-feedback strategy, and in this ten-minute interview at Davos, he discusses how close observation reveals principles about effective leadership.

Continuously Improving One Project

Here's an unusual TEDx talk by Stuart McDonald, who performs an interesting 7-minute magic show before his talk on applying feedback and continuous improvement to his act. Or, start here for just the TEDx talk, skipping the magical introduction.

1.5 Minutes of Steve Jobs

Just the essence of how Continuous Improvement works, on YouTube.