FEEDBACK
Fitness

Three Simple Steps for leaders to have Courageous Conversations that drive performance

Sue Anderson

Introduction

I've got some feedback for you.

This sentence has the power to send you into a frenzy of anticipatory dread and anxiety. Even if you are unsure what the feedback is about, your brain may scramble to come up with something you *must* have done wrong. Your old friend 'Not good enough' shows up, armed with a myriad of examples of where you have failed. Your heart starts to race, your armpits sweat, and your mouth starts drying out.

But then:

The CEO really sang your praises in our senior executive meeting this morning. She wants to catch up with you, herself, to thank you for the way you handled the Jones case. She was really impressed.

Sweet relief! You feel the tension leaving your body. You are exhilarated!

How can two simple sentences, like 'I've got some feedback for you' and 'She was really impressed', have two completely different effects on your emotions?

This book is intended to explore why the initial reaction to 'feedback' might be one of fear and dread, and how that also provides an opportunity to grow and learn. Strategies and solutions will be explored in regard to how to think and feel differently about both the offering and the receiving of feedback.

Receiving feedback is one thing but, if you feel a bit weird and awkward about offering feedback, you are not alone. I have spent more than ten years having confidential conversations **about** feedback with leaders in the workplace. I have listened to their beliefs, emotions, fears and struggles relating to feedback conversations. Those leaders have shared their innermost fears, their struggles and their triumphs relating to feedback they have offered and received. When it comes to describing their own feedback conversations, they have often use words such as 'difficult', 'challenging', 'nervous' and

'dread', before they have moved on to other words like 'courage', 'confidence', and 'inspired'.

It is through these conversations about feedback that I have been able to create my Feedback Fitness framework. In the process I have also looked at other frameworks and research related to feedback. I have coached individual leaders to implement the framework and have delivered my Feedback Fitness workshop hundreds of times across a variety of industries. My framework provides a structure and process which enables leaders to have confident and courageous feedback conversations. The process reduces friction and frustration and improves the effectiveness of future feedback conversations for both the person offering the feedback and the person receiving it.

Conversations of the Feedback Fitness kind are missing from most professional relationships. You will be amazed by what you can learn about yourself and others when you listen deeply to those others during your feedback conversations.

The Feedback Fitness framework sheds light on blind spots for both the person offering the feedback and the person receiving it and invites those involved to think about feedback in a way they never have before.

Leaders' reluctance to offer feedback

Common fears that leaders have about offering feedback include:

▶ What if people become upset, angry or withdrawn?

▶ What if I damage our relationship and it becomes awkward?

▶ What if they make a complaint about me?

▶ What if they accuse me of bullying them?

▶ What if they leave? Our team can't afford to lose another member at this busy time.

Problems caused by not being Feedback Fit

Feedback drives performance. If the Feedback Fitness in your team is low, and you are not part of an organisation that supports a Feedback Fit culture, problems like the following can arise.

- ▶ You don't have conversations that it would be useful to have.
- ▶ People stop offering feedback (adopting a position of: 'Let them figure it out for themselves').
- ▶ You have a 'nice and polite' culture, but miss identifying and rectifying real issues.
- ▶ You miss opportunities to improve.
- ▶ Lost productivity—meaning it's expensive!

The language used in this book

The following provides explanations of the important language choices made in this book.

'Offering' feedback, rather than 'giving' feedback

Throughout this book, you will notice the use of the term '*offering* feedback', rather than '*giving* feedback'. This is a deliberate choice.

If I 'give' someone feedback, it sounds like they have no choice other than to accept it. When I 'offer' them feedback, they can decide:

- ▶ whether they are open to considering it
- ▶ how they will think about the feedback
- ▶ whether they will take what is said on board or not.

> **Tip:**
> I prefer the 'offering' option because it implies choice. That's more empowering!

The 'other person', rather than the 'team member' or 'direct report'

This book is aimed at people in leadership roles. Because of that, I was very tempted to use the word 'leader' to describe the person offering the feedback and the terms 'team member' or 'direct report' to describe the person being offered it. I chose not to do that because, ideally, both parties in the relationship offer and receive feedback from each other at different times.

You will sometimes see the (at times awkward) use of 'the other person' for describing the recipient of feedback. This reference is to the person in the feedback conversation to whom feedback is being offered, but from whom feedback is possibly also being received.

> **Tip:**
> Think of feedback occurring in a series of two-way conversations, rather than as part of a one-off, one-way, event.

'Useful' feedback, rather than 'positive' or 'negative' feedback'

Let's keep it real! Many people are not skilled in offering feedback.

Suppose you are offered poorly delivered feedback by someone you can't stand. You may feel irritated, annoyed or frustrated. You could label that particular feedback experience as 'negative'. But let's suppose you were open to the person's feedback, considered it, then implemented it, and the impact of that was immediate and fabulous. You then feel wonderful!

Do we then label that feedback as 'positive' or 'negative'? It is neither—so let's go with a more neutral description: The feedback was 'useful'.

Alternatively, you could be offered the most eloquently expressed and beautifully delivered feedback from someone with whom you have a great relationship. You might feel 'positive' in the moment, but the feedback might not be useful. You can't action it and the person who delivered it hasn't considered the bigger context—so you feel frustrated. Do you label that feedback as 'positive' or 'negative?' It is neither—so let's go with a more neutral description: The feedback was 'not useful'.

Resist judging the feedback as positive or negative, and stick with terms for describing it that are similar to 'useful' or 'not useful'; 'actionable' or 'not actionable'; and 'effective' or 'ineffective'.

> **Tip:**
> Keep in mind, it is the person receiving the feedback who decides whether the feedback you offer is useful or not. We often mistakenly believe the feedback we are offering is fabulous!

'Word on the Street'

Over the past two years I have surveyed and interviewed hundreds of people in preparation for this book.

When you see a heading like the one above, containing the words 'Word on the Street', the content which follows it is the result of my own research. I have left the data as raw as possible (except for correcting a few typos and reducing the repetition of responses), so you can gain insight into the current thinking that is 'out there' in the real world.

Okay, let's begin!

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Do you want a team culture in which quality feedback conversations are expected, effective and embraced?

Leaders who feel confident and courageous in their feedback conversations lead teams characterised by increased performance, retention and growth. When leaders offer useful, effective feedback with courage and confidence, the impact of that feedback increases tenfold. The feedback fitness of all key players is vital if leaders want to have real impact on performance within their organisations.

It's time to increase the impact of your feedback conversations.

Sue Anderson has created a new feedback framework – one that provides leaders with a clear formula for successful feedback conversations. This book shows you the three simple steps you can take to enhance the quality of the feedback you are offering and, at the same time, nurture your relationships and build trust. The second half of the book focuses on the (often-forgotten) skill of being open and resilient when offered feedback. In other words, it outlines how you can create a feedback-fit culture for both offering and receiving feedback within your team.

About Sue:

Sue Anderson understands that feedback drives performance. She has been working as a coach, mediator, trainer, facilitator and speaker since 2007 and has helped thousands of leaders improve and enhance their confidence and their skills in communication and connection. She works individually with leaders and high conflict teams, as well as high performing teams, across many different industries.

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