FEEDBACK Fitness

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

Sue Anderson

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What's Really Going On

Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind. Sometimes speaking the truth feels like we are being unkind, especially when sharing difficult information or feedback. But in reality, dancing around the truth is unkind. When we avoid stating the truth when we are vague or ambiguous under the guise of being kind—it is often because we are trying to lessen the discomfort for ourselves, not for the other person.

Dr Brené Brown[15]

What is really going on in your feedback conversations?

What is the quality of your relationship with feedback? Are you casually dating, or are you deeply committed? On the following pages are several factors I've identified as characteristic of feedback conversations in the workplace. You might be experiencing some, or even all, of them.

Beliefs about feedback interfere with our feedback conversations

What you believe about feedback holds your feedback behaviour in place. What immediately comes to mind for you when you hear the word 'feedback'? Your childhood experiences, and feedback from family, teachers, coaches and your peers all impact your current thinking about feedback. Think back to your first job, what was your very first workplace experience of feedback?

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Useful beliefs about feedback

- Feedback helps me grow and learn in my role.
- I'd rather know now, rather than in three months.
- I can choose how I respond to the feedback offered to me.

Limiting beliefs about feedback

- Feedback means I've done something wrong.
- Feedback means I'm not good enough.
- Feedback makes me feel uncomfortable.

You can complete all the feedback skills training in the world but, if you continue to believe that feedback conversations are a threat and are dangerous, you will avoid participating in those conversations. That does make sense when we consider that we are always trying to keep ourselves safe; including psychologically safe.

If we believe feedback is about improving, learning and exploring our potential, we will be more comfortable with struggle, making mistakes and accepting the role of learner. We will be more open to considering feedback. We will value feedback and appreciate it when it is offered. We might even ask for it! (In Chapter 15, 'Power', we will explore how to develop more useful beliefs about feedback.)

One person's story: Anna

Anna, one of the leaders I have coached, expressed the following to me:

> *I had been in a leadership role for two years. I'd already attended a 'How to have Courageous Conversations' workshop—but I was still avoiding having them. I felt like an imposter. My limiting belief was, 'Leaders SHOULD know how to have these conversations—I don't, so I'm not a good leader.' I started to wonder if I was leadership material.*
>
> *The main reason I was afraid to have feedback conversations was . . . a risk of high conflict. And, consequently, without my peers and line manager knowing, I often buried my head in the sand and avoided the conversations, hoping things would magically improve on their own. Of course, they didn't.*

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I felt ashamed and guilty because I wasn't addressing the issues and having the hard conversations. I was already trying to step into my power—and I could be courageous at certain times, but I was also a people-pleaser and I didn't take feedback well (although I pretended to). I was good at supporting people and that's how I tried to deal with it; I just tried to give them more support. I thought, 'Maybe if I try hard enough, they will change.' Again, this was wishful thinking on my part.

I wasn't addressing the fundamental things like dynamics within the team and behaviour that wasn't aligned with our values. I didn't feel I could ask for help. I'd never admit to, and be vulnerable about, my lack of confidence in having these conversations. I didn't know how to deal with it. There was no Brené Brown podcast to listen to back then!'

I have included Anna's story here because it is one to which many leaders can relate. Until Anna develops more useful beliefs about feedback, it is going to be hard for her to build her confidence. If you can relate to that, you are not alone.

This book offers you a process and practical tools you can use to build your confidence when it comes to having feedback conversations.

Fear of emotions impacts our feedback conversations

Often, we are not fearful of the feedback, but it's the emotions we experience before, during and after feedback conversations that we are trying to avoid. We are apprehensive about feedback conversations because we are afraid of how the feedback might make us (or the other person) feel.

When people fear feedback conversations, it's often because they believe the feedback has the power to 'make them feel something'.

Following is a list of common examples of how people don't want to feel (or want the other person to feel) in feedback conversations:

- uncomfortable
- embarrassed

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- awkward
- fearful
- overwhelmed
- like a failure
- useless
- ashamed
- worried
- stupid
- not good enough
- anxious
- guilty
- humiliated

Many people try to control the emotions they feel in feedback conversations. If people have limiting beliefs about feedback, they can experience anxiety and dread in the lead up to a feedback conversation (even when they don't know what the conversation will be about)! You may have experienced these feelings, followed by sweet relief when the other person starts the conversation with the reassuring words, 'I just wanted to pass on some great feedback from the CEO about your work.'

I was delivering a Feedback Fitness workshop and one participant shared that she would never tell anyone if she was great at receiving feedback. Curious, I asked what she meant. Her response was: 'If I said I'm great at receiving feedback and open to it, people will give me lots of direct feedback, and I'm worried how that will make me feel.'

It wasn't the feedback she was worried about; it was how the feedback would **make her feel**. Her language gave a clue that she believes feedback can make her feel something she does not want to feel. (In Chapter 15, 'Power', we will explore how you can have more choice regarding how you feel.)

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Protective 'armour' prevents the feedback conversations being heard

Often, it's not the feedback that's the problem; it's the 'armour' we use to protect ourselves from the emotions that get in the way of the feedback conversation. When we are fearful of feedback and 'how it will make us feel', we armour up—trying to protect ourselves. But the armour is heavy and stops us from listening.

American researcher, Dr Brené Brown, refers to it as our 'armour of self-protection':

> *We all use armor to protect ourselves, but that armor is heavy and prevents us from growing, being seen and being in connection with others.*[16]

Here are examples of 'armours' you might observe in yourself and others before, during and after feedback conversations:

- perfectionism
- sarcasm
- defensiveness
- avoidance.

Suppose you lead a team of three people: David, Sam and Chevaan. You offer them feedback in your fortnightly one-on-one meetings. Their reactions to that feedback are as follows:

- David becomes emotional and offers to resign. He says he is a failure and starts getting tearful.
- Sam challenges, questions and argues with every statement you make. She says it's Chevaan who is holding up her work. She starts criticising your feedback-offering skills and tells you, 'You aren't a very good leader.'
- Chevaan stares blankly at you and offers one-word responses to your questions. He calls in sick the following day.

David, Sam and Chevaan have all displayed signs of different armours of self-protection. These are the types of responses dreaded by many people who offer feedback, and that dread is one of the reasons they are reluctant to even offer feedback. (We will explore

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the kind of self-protective armour just referred to in Chapter 15, 'Power'.)

Trying to be 'perfect' in our feedback conversations

If you are aiming for perfection in your feedback conversations—good luck! Feedback conversations are often messy and imperfect. Your armour gets in the way! Emotions complicate things. Feedback conversations involve humans trying to communicate while experiencing human emotions and they occur within a variety of complex contexts and degrees of relationships.

Think of Feedback Fit conversations as a series of ongoing conversations in which, ideally, both parties have discussed and agreed on the process beforehand. Feedback is not a speech, or something for which you write a script or rehearse and have only one chance at delivering perfectly. There is no perfect script.

Waiting for the perfect time, for you and the other person to be in the perfect mood, and then trying to say the perfect thing to gain the perfect response will result in procrastination—or worse, avoidance.

Be kind to yourself when it comes to feedback conversations. Most feedback conversations, especially challenging ones, occur in private. Therefore, it is highly likely you have not observed many skills for having challenging feedback conversations (unless you were the recipient of the feedback and, in that case, you were probably not observing the framework used by the person offering that feedback)!

When your self-talk about offering feedback is not useful (for example, Don't stuff it up! This is my one chance to get this feedback right. It must not go badly!'), it is normal to experience fear if you perceive offering feedback to be dangerous. This type of thinking takes you into 'all-or-nothing thinking': 'If I can't offer this feedback perfectly, I won't offer it at all.'

Worrying about feedback damaging relationships

I work as a consultant and, many years ago, I was asked by an organisation to come and present feedback (originating from a

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third party) to a team, because their performance was not meeting expectations. The CEO of the organisation, who had engaged me, explained that the relationship between the team and the manager had broken down, and he (the CEO) was 'unavailable' to deliver the feedback himself. As much as many leaders might like to, we can't always outsource tricky feedback conversations!

I understood this CEO's reasoning. It was much easier for me, as an outsider to come in and meet with the team and present the feedback to them. It wasn't *my* feedback. I didn't know the team or have any connection with them. I didn't need to have an ongoing relationship with them. It didn't matter if they became angry at me—I was just the messenger; I could walk out of their building and probably never see them again.

As a leader, 99% of the time you will be the one offering *your* feedback and receiving feedback from *your* people within *your* team and organisation. You will have a connection with them. You will (hopefully) know the names of their loved ones. You may have recruited them. You *need* to have an ongoing relationship with them. If you think there is a risk of a conversation going pear-shaped, it's understandable you will want to avoid that conversation.

In many cases, the risks of having feedback conversations are high and immediate, but the risk of not having those feedback conversations are even higher and have longer-term negative consequences. When you don't have the conversations that it would be useful for the organisation to have, you miss opportunities to learn and grow and, therefore, improve performance. A Feedback Fit culture drives performance.

As a leader, you are walking the tightrope of backing yourself and your decisions—and also being open to other people's opinions and feedback. You might be in danger of becoming a people-pleaser—not wanting to upset anyone, ever. You might have been taught, 'If you haven't anything nice to say, don't say anything at all,' and yet here you are, in a leadership role in which it is your job to sometimes say things that could be perceived as 'not nice'.

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Here are more examples of fears and concerns leaders have shared with me privately in regard to feedback conversations and maintaining ongoing relationships:

- 'What if they become upset or angry or withdrawn?'
- 'What if I offer them feedback and they think I'm being a bitch/bastard?'
- 'They can make my life a living hell—she is meant to be sharing her knowledge with me so I can do my job. I'm worried that if I upset her, she won't.'
- 'I want them to like me, actually I *need* them to like me.'
- 'I want team harmony not hostility.'
- 'It's a small town and I'm married to her sister . . .'
- 'I really like him/her, I don't want to upset him/her.'
- 'We were peers and friends outside of work, and then I stepped up into a team leader role. It's tricky.'

Some leaders pride themselves on being approachable, inclusive, and collaborative. They can also be over-responsible for the emotions of their team members and don't want any 'negative' feedback they offer to upset anyone. They believe their feedback can 'make others feel uncomfortable', and they don't want to do that because it's *awkward*.

When it comes to receiving feedback, many people are also worried about what other people think of them:

- 'I don't want to let my leader down, after all, she recruited me.'
- 'What if I'm exposed as a fraud?'
- 'I'll feel embarrassed by my mistakes/failures.'
- 'Oh God! She's called my latest project "excellent", now all my future projects must be to the same high-standard and I just don't have the energy for that . . .'
- 'My leader thinks I'm dumb/stupid . . .'
- 'It's only a matter of time before my leader realises I'm not as good as s/he thinks I am.'
- 'I don't want to disappoint them, my team, anyone (everyone, ever).'

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Your organisation has a 'nice and polite' culture

▸▸ *One person's story: An anonymous CEO*

The following was said to me by one of the CEOs I coached:

> *When it comes to feedback, we have an avoidance culture. Leaders would rather be perceived as 'nice' and 'polite'. Sometimes it's just easier to not say anything. But in the car park, plenty is being said about people behind their backs.*

When I asked this CEO to tell me more, she shared that her organisation hadn't invested in its people or created a healthy feedback culture. The leaders hadn't had any training on the topic of feedback.

> *To be fair, the skills just aren't there. As a result, the conversations are not being had, and the expectations are not clear. But it's more than that, we have an avoidance culture.*

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Suppose an organisation has done the groundwork and developed systems to ensure a Feedback Fit culture was in place—a culture in which feedback conversations were expected and normal. Suppose this started at the recruitment phase, was included in interviews, and then was part of the 'onboarding' process:

> *Welcome to the team. We value your learning, growth and ongoing development. We have many conversations in which we offer and receive feedback from each other. Don't worry, we will ensure you possess the skills to have these conversations.*

Ensure there are no surprises, just clear expectations, with a clear process and conversations about that process. Importantly, encourage people to see the value of feedback conversations, and to be actively contributing to a culture of Feedback Fitness. You might need to 'sell' the benefits to them!

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Word on the Street

Survey question

I asked a sample of people the following question:

> **What do you believe are the barriers to leaders offering feedback in the workplace?**

The responses have been grouped into the following four main themes.

i Leaders are worried about how it will go.

ii Leaders are lacking in skill/confidence.

iii Leaders have time constraints.

iv The organisation's systems and culture do not support Feedback Fitness.

I will now discuss each of these themes in more detail.

(i) Leaders are worried about how it will go

The following list summarises how this was expressed by the survey participants.

- Not wanting to upset staff.
- Worried about how it will be received.
- Worried the recipient will get offended/upset.
- Fear of impact on staff (for example, making them upset or anxious).
- Worried about how it will be received by employees (especially older, more established employees).
- Fear of how staff may receive the feedback, especially if it has been anticipated as negative.
- Worried about giving negative or constructive feedback because unsure of the response.
- Negative reactions from reports/fear.
- Fear of offending/hurting others, and the reactions that could result.
- Concerned about the reaction and repercussions that may occur.

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- 'Direct reports' feeling personally attacked and not receptive to feedback.
- Concerns about how to best offer constructive feedback.
- Fear of getting it wrong or making things worse.
- Fear of doing it wrong.
- Not saying the right thing.
- Insecurity.
- A lack of psychological safety.
- Not wanting conflict.
- Fear and an inability to invest in the relationship outside of giving feedback.
- Trying to maintain respect from employees.
- Worried it will lead to low morale.
- It will at times be taken the wrong way and seen as 'power over' or 'bullying'.
- Upsetting the harmony in the workplace.
- Knowledge that it won't be accepted.
- Rejection and disbelief.
- The lack of resilience from others in receiving the feedback.
- Having a history of not doing it and the worry of staff leaving if it is done.

(ii) Leaders are lacking in skill/confidence

The following list summarises how this was expressed by the survey participants.

- Leaders are not skilled in offering feedback and are rather clumsy at offering it.
- Not sure how to do it in a sensitive way.
- Not sure how to ensure feedback is actionable.
- Not knowing how to offer feedback that is relevant and specific, while setting expectations.
- Not enough experience.
- They don't have the necessary skills.

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- Lack of feedback training/experience.
- Lack of knowledge in relation to how and when.
- Lack of experience/understanding related to how to offer feedback.
- Lack of confidence or not knowing how to deliver the feedback.
- Lack of management capability in people-management skills, leading to a lack of confidence to have honest feedback conversations.
- Unsure what to say, how to say it, lack of relationship to offer feedback, lack of well-defined expectations/goals to measure against.
- Insecurity of abilities, self-doubt, fear of judgement.
- Not confident—lack of practice/guidance to build the necessary skills.
- Unclear themselves on the expectations and how to hold people accountable.
- Lack of confidence and awareness of the importance of feedback.

(iii) Leaders have time constraints

The following list summarises how this was expressed by the survey participants.

- Lack of time '× 8'.
- Perceived lack of time.
- Time to structure, deliver and seek feedback; everything is always 'urgent' and opportunities for feedback are forever pushed to 'later'.
- Time needed to have one-on-one conversations, so feedback can be given sensitively and with appropriate time for the recipient to digest and respond.
- Lack of time and an abundance of work.
- They just don't make the time.
- Time poor (don't schedule time to give feedback).
- Time and the confidence to provide feedback.
- Time poor and not understanding roles.
- Time constraints; see it as optional; lack of confidence.

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- Time-poor, no appropriate set-up.
- Lack of time; limited knowledge on how to offer feedback.
- Time to prepare and the busy nature of our workplace.
- Lack of available time, not being in the same location as the team.
- Having enough time to reflect on the work of individuals; have so many people in teams and extremely busy.
- Poor communication/insufficient time for feedback to occur.
- Needs continuity, taking the time to evaluate staff performance and communicate.

(iv) The organisation's systems and culture do not support Feedback Fitness

The following list summarises how this was expressed by the survey participants.

- Clunky/ineffective performance review process.
- 'Us and them' syndrome.
- The culture hasn't been set up for staff to be able to receive feedback in a timely manner.
- Not being held accountable by their leaders to provide feedback.
- Lack of clarity around expectations of what good performance looks like within and across teams.
- Tradition and culture; the way things are done around here—set by the leader.
- Personality types—some are very open, others very closed.
- Lack of processes implemented.

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FEEDBACK Fitness

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.

Sue Anderson

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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