Day 7: Thanks for the Feedback 2

Wednesday, February 17, 2021 6:13 PM

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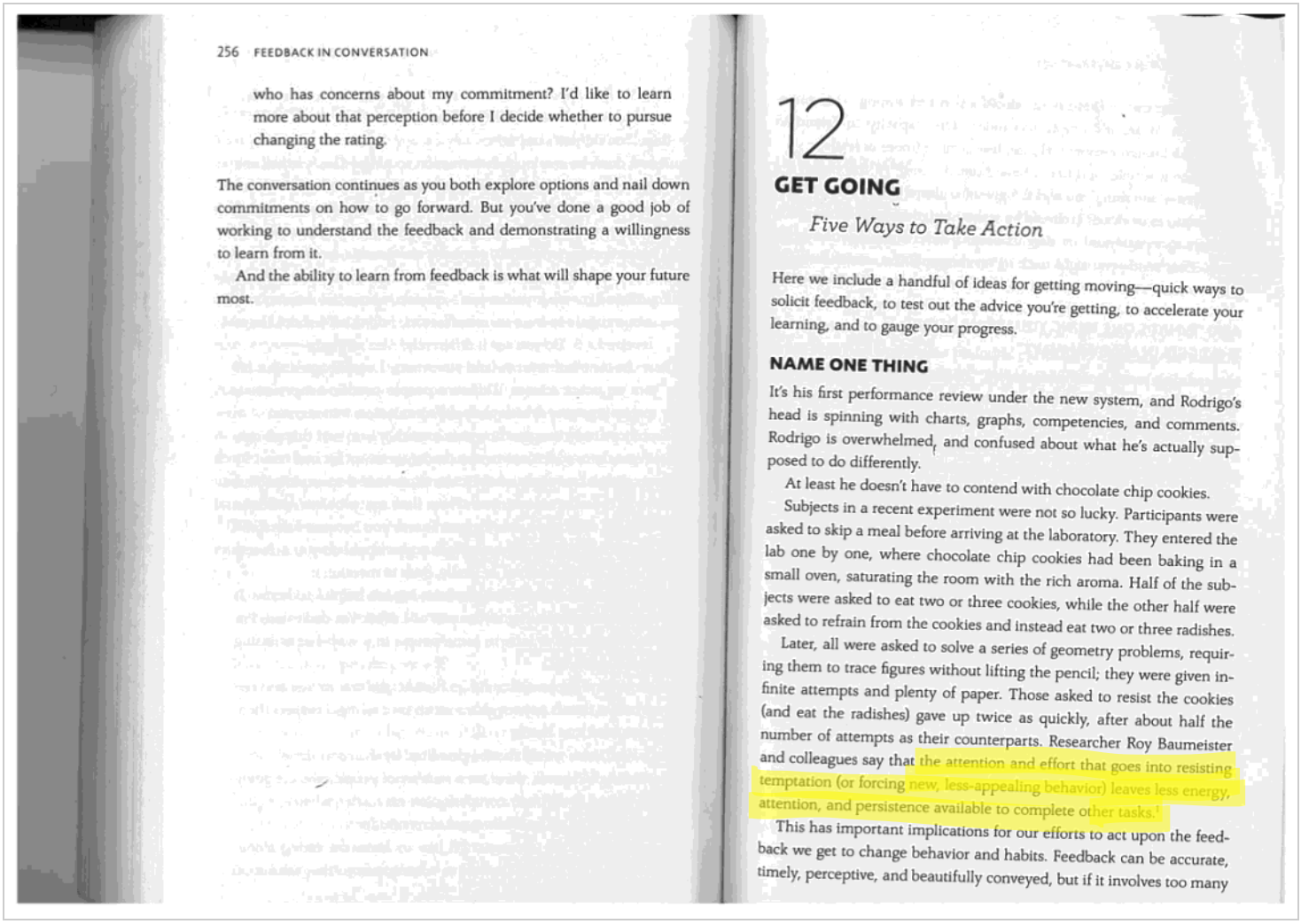


who has concerns about my commitment? I'd like to learn more about that perception before I decide whether to pursue changing the rating.

The conversation continues as you both explore options and nail down commitments on how to go forward. But you've done a good job of working to understand the feedback and demonstrating a willingness to learn from it.

And the ability to learn from feedback is what will shape your future most.

12

GET GOING

Five Ways to Take Action

Here we include a handful of ideas for getting moving—quick ways to solicit feedback, to test out the advice you're getting, to accelerate your learning, and to gauge your progress.

NAME ONE THING

It's his first performance review under the new system, and Rodrigo's head is spinning with charts, graphs, competencies, and comments. Rodrigo is overwhelmed, and confused about what he's actually supposed to do differently.

At least he doesn't have to contend with chocolate chip cookies.

Subjects in a recent experiment were not so lucky. Participants were asked to skip a meal before arriving at the laboratory. They entered the lab one by one, where chocolate chip cookies had been baking in a small oven, saturating the room with the rich aroma. Half of the subjects were asked to eat two or three cookies, while the other half were asked to refrain from the cookies and instead eat two or three radishes.

Later, all were asked to solve a series of geometry problems, requiring them to trace figures without lifting the pencil; they were given infinite attempts and plenty of paper. Those asked to resist the cookies (and eat the radishes) gave up twice as quickly, after about half the number of attempts as their counterparts. Researcher Roy Baumeister and colleagues say that the attention and effort that goes into resisting temptation (or forcing new, less-appealing behavior) leaves less energy, attention, and persistence available to complete other tasks.[1]

This has important implications for our efforts to act upon the feedback we get to change behavior and habits. Feedback can be accurate, timely, perceptive, and beautifully conveyed, but if it involves too many

ideas to keep track of, too many decisions to sort through, too many changes to make, it's simply too much. Our capacity to attend to change is a limited resource. Hence, less is more (more or less).

So keep it simple, and here's how: *Name one thing.* At the end of the day, is there one thing you and the giver (or givers) see as most important for you to work on? It should be something meaningful and useful, but don't get paralyzed by that. It doesn't have to be the one *perfect* thing. That sends you right back to no things. Just a useful thing. A place to start.

ASK: "WHAT'S ONE THING YOU SEE ME DOING THAT GETS IN MY OWN WAY?"

How to elicit just one thing? Don't say, "I'd like some feedback." That's too vague. Instead say: "What's one thing I could work on?" Or, as we discuss in chapter 4, you can sharpen it by asking: "What's one thing you see me doing, or failing to do, that's getting in my own way?" This gives your giver permission to go a little further than usual (hey, you did ask), and it helps them prioritize and cut to the chase.

Of course, emergencies are emergencies; if your hair *and* pants are on fire, the one-thing formula doesn't quite fit. And don't use "name one thing" as a way to simply dismiss someone's concerns. You may not be able to work on ten concerns, but if your giver has ten concerns, they have them. Work to understand and validate them, and then swing back around and set priorities: "You've raised a number of different issues, and we've discussed why each is important. I'm serious about improving, and it's been my experience that the best way for me to do that is to focus on one thing at a time. Let's figure out a good place for me to start."

It's not always easy. When your youngest daughter offers you feedback, she's not going to react well when you tell her you've already received your "one thing" for the month from her older sister. So, depending on how big or challenging the changes, you can work on a few at a time, especially if they are on different fronts. You can be working on being more patient with your oldest and more consistent

with your youngest. In aiming for one, you're setting expectations: Let's focus.

LISTEN FOR THEMES

Rodrigo's feedback report contained dozens of comments and suggestions, and three highlighted "areas of improvement." Most of the feedback was vague and label-y (for example, at the mean on "empathy," below the mean on "engagement"). In the end, it was the sheer volume of the feedback that left him at a loss for where to begin.

So Rodrigo put aside the report and set off on his own mission. He chose three people he worked closely with in different roles, and threw in his boss and a coworker he found particularly irritating. He went to each and asked this question: "What's one thing I'm doing that you think gets in the way of my own effectiveness?" He asked follow-up questions to clarify. The longest conversation took ten minutes.

Rodrigo knew that he'd end up with more than "one thing" to consider, but he looked for themes. Here are the headlines based on his conversations:

Let us know where you stand sooner.

You hang back and let others dominate the conversation. Given your unique background, we need you to weigh in earlier.

Be more visible at HQ.

I can't tell when you've made a decision. If you have, tell us so we can move on.

The way I think you shoot yourself in the foot is by being disorganized.

Of the five people he talked to, three went straight to his tendency as a team leader to hang back and let conversation run. Until he received this feedback, that shortcoming wasn't even on his radar. (In retrospect

he realized that it had been mentioned in his feedback report, but if you hadn't already been looking for it, you'd never have seen it buried in the data.) In fact, until now, he thought he had the opposite challenge: He worried that he was not giving the team enough input into decisions and was working hard at inclusiveness. After talking to colleagues, he discovered that there were times when he needed to give more direction and be clear about when he had made up his mind, so that they could move on to discussing implementation.

So Rodrigo has decided his one thing for the next month is to work on speaking up and providing more direction. One colleague offered a particularly helpful bit of coaching: "She suggested that I be willing to go a little overboard. If I do, she promised to tell me. If I'm less worried about going too far, I'll improve quicker."

ASK WHAT MATTERS TO *THEM*

One last way to seek out one change that could have a big impact is to ask: "What's one thing I could change that would make a difference *to you*?" Sharon posed this question to her three young boys over dinner: "I've been under a lot of pressure at work, and I keep asking you for more help and understanding. But let's turn the tables. What's one thing I could do differently that would help you guys?"

Sharon couldn't imagine any useful answer to this question. She figured that if there were an easy fix, she'd already be doing it. Eight-year-old Aidan yelled out, "more Skittles," which sparked a fight between Aidan and twelve-year-old Owen, who not unreasonably thought "more Skittles" was a stupid answer. Not a strong start to the conversation.

Then ten-year-old Colin spoke up: "We never go bowling anymore."

This struck Sharon as only marginally better than "more Skittles," but she could see that Colin was serious. "So you miss bowling?" she asked.

"Not that much," said Colin.

Baffled, Sharon said, "So tell us why you mention bowling."

Colin had an answer: "It's the only time the four of us ever do anything together, with *just us*, and we haven't done it for a year." He was right. Foursome time mattered less to his more social brothers, but it

mattered a lot to Colin, and Sharon hadn't noticed. Sharon called the alley and reserved a lane.

One question, one thing.

TRY SMALL EXPERIMENTS

Sometimes you are clear about whether you want to take the feedback: Now that I understand what you're suggesting, I think it's a fantastic idea and I can't wait to dive in. Or: Now that I understand what you're suggesting, I'm going to go ahead and say no (painting my living room black—it's not the right look for me). And sometimes we fall somewhere in the middle, unsure if it's a good idea or not. I'll table it for now and I'll come back to it, perhaps if I get reincarnated as someone with free time.

In any event, we try to be analytical about the feedback we get, considering pros and cons, weighing different options, and finally doing what makes sense. But here's the challenge: In any contest between change and the status quo, the status quo has home field advantage. All things being equal, we won't change.

Emily is a good example. Her nonprofit, which supports young parents and teaches parenting skills, was built from the ground up, with hard work and a vision as big as the world. Her message is inspirational and her ideas important.

Reaction to her two-hour public sessions has been overwhelmingly positive. But time and again she gets feedback from coworkers, guest speakers, and parents that her twenty-minute introduction to the organization and its work at the beginning of her talk is too long. She should jump right into the evening's activities.

For five years Emily resisted these suggestions. After all, she was a great speaker, she knew how to motivate people, the workshops got strong reviews, and she'd been successful doing it her way. There was just no reason to change things up until now.

When things are going well, feedback can feel threatening, and not just because it suggests we have something to learn or aren't yet perfect. It's threatening because it is asking us to let go of something that's comfortable and predictable. We're already doing just fine, and even if

we're not, at least we're aware of the consequences. I know I'm late for everything, but so far it hasn't had a disastrous impact on my life. The guests didn't have to wait *that* long, and in the end, we got married, didn't we?

DON'T DECIDE, EXPERIMENT

Here's our pitch: Experiment. Try the feedback out, especially when the stakes are low and the potential upside is great. Not because you *know* that it's right or you know it will help. But because it's possible it will help. And because actions so often have unforeseen consequences, and trying new things stirs the pot. And because you (we) don't try new things often enough.

Try It On

Sometimes you can do the experiment in your head.

Harpreet had been teaching for several years when he received a shocking set of comments on a student evaluation: "The professor is arrogant and condescending toward students. He is dismissive of their ideas and concerns."

Harpreet felt ill. This characterization could not be more out of step with his values and self-image. Dedicated to fostering students' growth in his lab, he prided himself on his commitment to mentoring. He decided to discuss the evaluation with his department head. "Look at these comments," he said to her. "I can't understand how a student could say such a thing."

She skimmed the comments and after a moment looked up and said, "Well, try it on." Harpreet was dumbfounded. He sputtered, "I'm not sure what you mean." "Try it on," she repeated. "Assume the student is on to something."

"But the student is *not* on to something," Harpreet protested, sort of joking but mostly not.

"Sit with the possibility for a few days," she suggested. "Not because you already know it fits, but because it's a good way of finding out. If it doesn't, no worries. Take it off. But if it does, even in some small way, then it gives you something to work on."

Trying on a piece of feedback in your mind's dressing room can be uncomfortable, but it's a low-risk way of experimenting. Harpreet did try on the feedback, and after considering it from different angles, he began to see what the student might have meant. While he didn't regard certain comments that he had made as arrogant, he could see now how someone might. This new perspective on himself—not "the truth," but an alternate way of seeing—proved enormously valuable for Harpreet and influenced how he interacted with his students for the rest of his career. And he would not have had access to it if he hadn't taken a genuine run at trying it on as true.

Try It Out

For years your spouse has been urging you to wake up earlier and do yoga before going to work. There are two things you don't like about this suggestion: waking up early and yoga. You can't see how trying it would have any positive effect on your life. And you have a rule: "If you can't see how trying something would help, don't try it." Your spouse thinks you're being lazy, but you know you're just being smart.

And then this thought pops into your head: *I am fifty. If I live to be eighty I will wake up roughly 11,000 more times. If I try yoga and don't like it, I will have 10,999 mornings remaining to wake up at my preferred time.*

So one morning you wake up early and go to yoga. You are surprised to learn that this yoga is different from the yoga of your youth. The instructor said to you afterward, "I hope you didn't injure yourself." But despite this "feedback," you have to admit that you sort of liked it. And you certainly liked the effect it seemed to have on the rest of your day. You decide to go a few more times, just to test this out.

The one downside of this situation is that your spouse gets to be right, and you have to admit you were wrong. But you protest: "I wasn't wrong, because it's different yoga, and there's no way I could have anticipated that." Exactly. That's why such low-cost experiments are so great. You do them even though you have misgivings, because you know that you are occasionally wrong. Not as often as your spouse thinks, perhaps, but occasionally.

You May Be Surprised

Dr. Atul Gawande is an accomplished surgeon, *New Yorker* writer, and professor at Harvard Medical School. You'd figure if anyone was feeling at the top of their game, it would be this guy.

But Gawande wondered if he could improve. So he hired a surgical coach to observe him, looking for ways he might enhance both his surgical technique and his already-commendable outcomes. He figured it was possible the coach would see something he hadn't.

The coach's recommendations surprised Gawande. He had a number of technical suggestions ("When you are tempted to raise your elbow, that means you either need to move your feet or to choose a different instrument.").[2] The coach was also able to point out some of Gawande's blind spots: The way he draped the patient for surgery gave Gawande a perfect line of vision on the procedure but partially obstructed the view of his assistant across the table. This was invisible to Gawande but instantly obvious to the coach. And the coach "pointed out ways I had missed opportunities to help the team perform better," observes Gawande.[3] The impact of the advice was large. After following the coach's ideas—a few at a time over a number of months—Gawande has seen his complication rates go down.

Gawande didn't hire a coach because he knew he needed one, or foresaw these particular improvements. He hired one because there didn't seem to be much downside in doing so, and the upside, though unclear, seemed worth exploring. And it certainly proved worthwhile for his patients and for his team, who saw him model an interest in and openness to continuous learning and improvement.

IT'S NOT ALL-AND-ALWAYS

Lowering the stakes often means reframing the question you are asking yourself when it comes to feedback. If the question is "Should I go to yoga for the rest of my life?" the answer will always be no. If it's "Should I try yoga for one morning and see what I think?" the costs drop dramatically.

Emily heard the advice she was getting—cut out the twenty-minute windup—as an all-and-always suggestion: Do your workshops entirely differently for the rest of time. And by the way, it wouldn't hurt if you admitted you had been wrong all along.

Emily finally changed when she shifted away from the all-and-always frame. While she wasn't yet persuaded that scrapping the twenty minutes spent on the big-picture vision was the right call, she decided to try it for one night to see what happened. She welcomed the new parents and then jumped right into the program.

The results of her experiment? There were a few awkward moments when Emily lost her place without her regular script. And it turned out that there were parts of her standard intro that she wanted to retain. But she did find that the full twenty minutes weren't really necessary: "Next time I'll do five minutes on what they really need to know and hand out something written at the end for those who want more details."

It's not all-and-always. Just some-and-sometimes.

Some experiments will inevitably turn out to be a waste of time—that's why they're called experiments. But in the aggregate, there are significant life rewards for being willing to test out feedback even when you're not sure it's right, or even pretty sure it's wrong. At the very least, it shows the giver you are open to trying their advice, and there are surely relationship advantages to that.

RIDE OUT THE J CURVE

This is the story of Bernardus and the new customer tracking system. Stop us if you've heard it before.

The head of sales has been after Bernardus for months to use the new Web-based database that enables you to enter and retrieve data from anywhere, and share information with everyone. If Bernardus goes on vacation he won't have to spend hours bringing someone up to speed on a particular account; he'll just give them the file name. And he will no longer have to worry about finding those little scraps of paper with numbers and e-mails and cryptic notations describing the customer's priorities and preferences.

It's a wondrous system; Bernardus is convinced of its usefulness. But

he can't get himself to actually make the switch. He starts using the system, gets frustrated, and switches midway through a customer call. Or he uses the system for a few days, and then forgets and realizes a week later that he's got hours of data to enter to catch up. His note-taking habits have been years in the making and feel dependent on a pencil and trusty paper, no matter how dog-eared. It's not rational. It is resistant to change.

Sometimes we don't do the right, smart, effective, healthy thing because we don't know what that is. But sometimes we know exactly what the right, smart, effective, healthy thing is, and we still don't do it.

TWO DECISION MAKERS

This isn't a new problem. You remember the story of Odysseus? He's worried about being seduced by the sirens, whose songs have lured many a sailor to shipwreck. Odysseus knows he won't be able to make the right choice once he's in the midst of the straits and hears their alluring song. So instead of relying on willpower exercised in that perilous moment, he has his sailors tie him to the mast ahead of time. Odysseus "precommits" to honoring his current desire, preventing his ability to waver when faced with future temptation.

Homer was on to something about the challenges of making good choices, potentially as useful to Bernardus as it was to Odysseus. Economist Thomas Schelling says much of our puzzling behavior when it comes to (failing to) keep our commitments to ourselves results from a kind of split personality we all possess.[4] We decide on Sunday night that come Monday morning we will finally start that low-carb diet. So far so good. But when Monday morning arrives, we are faced with choices: Should I enjoy my usual breakfast muffin, or restrict myself to eggs and ham? Not green, but without the carbs, almost as unappealing. Well, there's really very little difference between starting that diet today and starting tomorrow, or even next week, for that matter.

So our Monday Morning self violates the agreement made by our Sunday Night self. Mr. Sunday Night wants to stop procrastinating and start the diet. He's disgusted by Monday Morning guy's refusal to change but what can he do? Come Monday morning, Monday Morning guy is in charge.

So Mr. Sunday Night asks himself: *Is there a way that I can not only make the choice to change but also bind Monday Morning guy to abide by my choice?* There is. Mr. Sunday Night can change the terms of the choice so that Monday Morning guy arrives at the "right" conclusion: We're both going to start that diet.

Mr. Sunday Night can do that in one of two ways: He can increase the positive appeal of the desired change or increase the negative consequences of not changing.

INCREASE THE POSITIVE APPEAL OF CHANGE

Let's look first at how to make changing more appealing to Monday Morning guy.

Make It Social

Unpleasant things are less unpleasant when you have company. Find a friend, colleague, coach, or fellow aspiring dieter and suggest doing it together. Agree on check-in times, e-mail reports of trials and triumphs, have (low-carb) lunch to discuss progress. Commiserate. Coach, support, honestly reflect.

An obvious reason that making it social helps is that it makes a task that might not otherwise be fun, fun. Or a little bit fun, anyway. And combining change with human connection recasts the emotional story of the effort. It's no longer "I'm suffering," but "We are getting through it together." Friends have mutual closet-cleaning days; students study together; otherwise solitary writers share office space.

A second reason is that it makes you accountable to someone else. You might be okay letting yourself down, but now you have your friend to think of, too. And finally, walking the journey alongside someone else can provide appreciation. A dieting friend or newly hired personal trainer really understands the sacrifices you are making. They witness your progress, *see* you sweat, cheer your efforts. Their appreciation helps motivate you to stick with it even when you are not particularly in the mood.

Extroverts are probably thinking this makes a lot of sense—they typically get energy from being with other people. Introverts may be hearing this suggestion as just one more burden—not only do I have to diet or exercise, but now I have to *meet* people, too?

You can get the benefits without having to buddy up or join a rah-rah city bicycling club. Online communities provide a place to check in, to get empathy, gather useful tips, and be accountable, without having to get out of your pajamas or endure awkward small talk. Communities have formed on the Web for just about anything you might be dealing with—whether it's getting your spending under control, coping with the stress of caring for your autistic child, or losing weight. Maybe Bernardus can find one—or start one—for finally using that customer tracking software. After all, it *is* wondrous.

Keep Score

Another way to increase the reward of keeping a commitment is to keep score. Keeping score is a primary reason that video games are so addictive—they offer an instant measure of your progress and an invitation to reset and try again.

Shigeru Miyamoto is the creative force behind Nintendo's best-selling video games—the Mario Bros. franchise and The Legend of Zelda. When Miyamoto turned forty, he decided to get in shape. He took up jogging and swimming, and kept elaborate charts of his activity and his weight taped to the bathroom wall. By "keeping score" this way, he shifted his workout regimen from a self-improvement kick to a game.[5]

He did so for himself, and then for the rest of us: Miyamoto's Wii Fit is the third highest-selling console game of all time. A balance board weighs you in, and your workout time and accomplishments are tracked as you jog through island wonderlands or hula hoop. Introducing an element of play can "get people to do things they might not normally do," Miyamoto explains. It's a way to engage your playful self in facing a challenge and solving problems. And keeping score is a way to set up those positive feedback dopamine hits that entice you to keep trying.

Gamification[6] has such pull that it's now being used (not without controversy) for everything from customer engagement to education. Many middle school science teachers in Massachusetts encourage their students to play JogNog, an online game in which students accrue points for answering "towers" of science questions, with their accomplishments ranked nationwide on a real-time leaderboard. Eighth grader Antoine, who had previously declared science class "boring" and "too easy," found himself using scarce weekend screen time not for video games, but to complete thousands of science questions. As he scanned the leaderboard, noting the point gap between himself and the student above him, he mumbled, "Now I have to pass *him*—just to keep my honor." It's not just about science anymore.

The best games strike a "magical balance between the excitement of facing new problems and the swagger from facing down old ones," writes Nick Paumgarten about Miyamoto's Nintendo games. You can't stay motivated if you have to try your hardest all the time. You need to experience the satisfaction of exercising skills you have mastered, interspersed with the new ones you're working hard to improve. It can't be all learning curve. You need the downhills to coast and recharge.

How to capitalize on these insights when it comes to acting on your feedback and working to change? Well, whatever the task you're engaged in, are there ways to keep score? Are there ways to make the process more competitive, playful, or satisfying? If you're working on procrastination, can you create an incentive system for daily pieces of a project accomplished? If you're trying to act on your husband's request that you stop swearing, paying into a quarter jar not only raises your own awareness but makes it fun for your kids to "help." Download an app that will track your food choices and calorie count. Put on a pedometer and see if you can beat yesterday's step total. This type of approach just might persuade Monday Morning guy to leave the muffin behind.

INCREASE THE COST OF NOT CHANGING

So far we've been talking about ways to tip the calculus in favor of change by increasing the appeal of trying to change. Now let's turn to the other side of the scale: how to increase the cost of choosing not to change.

Tie Yourself to the Mast

Here's a thought: What if the choice was "go low carb, or choose the muffin and donate $500 to the American Nazi party"? Well, that sure changes the siren song of the muffin, right?

But why would one of your choices ever be "eat the muffin and donate to the American Nazi party"?

It wouldn't, unless you designed it that way on purpose, by tying yourself to the mast. How would that work? You give a friend $500 to hold for you. If you don't start your diet when you say you will, he agrees, for real, to donate the money to the American Nazi party. It has nothing to do with your diet, but it certainly changes the terms of the choice.

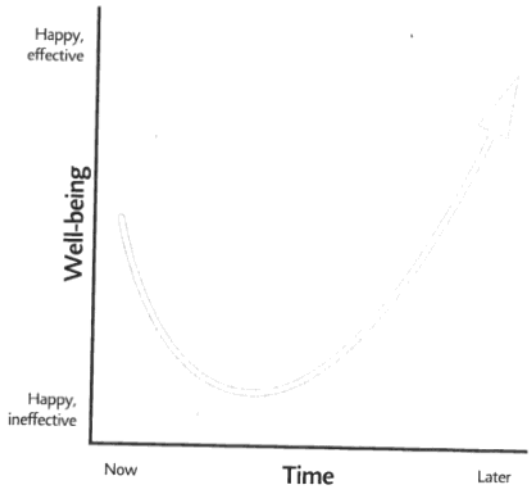
Thomas Schelling finally stopped smoking by using the threat of donating to the American Nazi party on himself. He has helped doctors break their own drug addictions by having them write a letter to the medical board confessing the problem, seal it, and entrust it to a friend who will mail it if they relapse. One more hit of cocaine isn't just one more hit; it's their license, their career, and their reputation.

Recognize the J Curve

As you work to change, there's a pattern that's worth getting to know, because it's so common and has such a profound effect on our behavior and choices. This pattern is important precisely because its tricky shape can otherwise fool you.

When we try to take feedback that requires change or start any new and challenging activity, a common pattern that results is what's called the J Curve. Imagine a graph where the vertical axis gauges well-being (happiness, contentment, etc.), and the horizontal axis represents time. High is happy, low is unhappy. Left is now, right is later.

In terms of happiness we start somewhere in the middle. We're going about things the way we always have and so we're perhaps medium happy. Maybe our usual approach is working reasonably well though it generates complaints (feedback) from others, or maybe we're not happy with the status quo ourselves, but so far we haven't been able to change.



Now, however, we're going to get serious. We're going to finally learn to swim, get out and meet people, cut back on gossiping, leave ourselves more time to get to the airport, provide more mentoring for our team members. As we begin to implement our change we may find that our level of happiness immediately drops. It's uncomfortable. It's awkward. We get worse at whatever we're doing rather than better; we feel vaguely depressed. We begin to slide downward, and we seem only to be heading lower. We not unreasonably take stock: I may not have been thrilled before, but now, as I'm changing, things are taking a turn for the worse. I feel awful. I don't like this change.

That's how things feel now. And we begin to wonder about the future. How is this going to turn out, this new thing we're doing? We've done nothing but head downhill, as if pulled by gravity. Do we keep sledding downward until we crash?

Of course not. We should stop. This effort to change was a big

mistake. We cancel the change. Sorry, Mr. Sunday Night, we tried. It just didn't work out.

It's a sad story, but it makes sense . . . *if*, that is, our projection that we are going to continue to go down is correct. But what if we're at the bottom of the curve and are about to head up the happiness slope? What if we are on our way to surpassing our previous level of contentment and skill?

In other words, what if the curve is in the unlikely shape of a J? The truth is, at any time you are changing your habits or approach, or working on a new skill, you are likely to get worse before you get better. And more important, you are likely to *feel* worse before you feel better. In these moments, it's useful to know that a common trajectory isn't further downward, but—eventually—back up.

This suggests that committing in advance to working at something for a specific amount of time—a time that reaches past that most challenging first stage—can be useful. Give it two weeks, thirty days, a fiscal year—whatever seems like a reasonable duration to test whether this new behavior might actually help. Whether you're learning to sleep with a breathing machine to help your apnea, or learning to stop running the experiments themselves and start running the lab, you need to resist letting the dip of the curve erode your resolve.[7]

Understanding the typical trajectory of the J Curve is what ultimately helped Bernardus. His first few weeks with the online database were a minor disaster. He lost data, and it took him longer to input information into the computer than to take handwritten notes. But he started keeping score of the number of customers he successfully entered, and his miss percentage slowly started to improve. Six months later he takes notes in the database while directly on the customer call, and he's starting to enjoy the benefits of having all of his customer information accessible in one place, and on his phone, freeing him from needing to carry his laptop 24/7. Bernardus is now enjoying the upswing of that happiness curve.

All of these ideas can help you to make good on your commitment to implement feedback and to change. By seeing the choice in a new light, or by actually changing the choice, you can change your behavior, and that very often sets in motion a virtuous cycle. And motion—getting going and keeping going—is the goal.

COACH YOUR COACH

When one of the authors was in high school (we won't say which author), he played defensive back on the football team. He saw limited action his junior year, so was excited one Saturday afternoon to be called into the game. As the defense huddled, the defensive captain barked out the formation: "In and Out Zone!" Everyone ran off to their respective positions.

Just prior to the snap, Doug shouted in panic to the captain: "What's an 'In and Out Zone?'" Doug's internal monologue was running like this: *I'm playing varsity football in front of all these people and I have no idea what the defensive formation is. I don't know where to go or what I'm supposed to do. What's* wrong *with me?*

The captain yelled back: "We don't know! Just guard someone!"

After the game Doug expected the captain—or someone—to ask the coach exactly what an "In and Out" formation involved, but no one did. Apparently, if you didn't understand the formation, you were just supposed to "guard someone." And that's what Doug did, for the rest of the season. At season's end the team had a perfect record: 0-8.

Doug could have said to the coach: "Can we go over the formations again slowly until I really understand them?" But he feared admitting what he didn't know, and anyway, that's not how things worked: The coaches coached, and the players played. Players didn't "coach the coach" to help the coaching staff understand what the players actually needed to learn to get better results.

Here we'll use the term "coach" broadly to mean anyone who gives you feedback. That includes formal mentors, of course, but more often our "coaches" are peers, clients, coauthors, collaborators, bandmates, roommates, friends, or family members. We collaborate to turn out the best product, we ask colleagues to help us get up to speed, we get advice—solicited and unsolicited—from a financial planner or our uncle Phil. Too often, though, we respond the way the players on that football team did: If we don't understand the advice, or how it's being

offered to us isn't helping, we don't step back and discuss it. Our colleagues and family aren't even aware that the advice isn't getting through. Or perhaps they are very aware it's not getting through, but they're not seeing that how they're handling it is part of the problem.

That's unfortunate, because coaching your coach—discussing the process of what helps you and why—is one of the most powerful ways to accelerate your learning.

WHAT COACHING YOUR COACH DOESN'T MEAN

"Coaching your coach" does not mean laying down the law about how you wish to be talked to: "When you point out that I come in late all the time, it makes me feel bad, so from now on let's stick with praise." Or: "I'd do a lot better on this eye exam if you tested me with bigger letters."

The goal is not to erect barriers to the delivery of challenging or inconvenient feedback; in fact, it's just the opposite. Your aim is to find ways that you and your coach can collaborate so that communication is clear and efficient and you learn what's most important to learn as quickly as you can. The goal is to work together to minimize the interference.

And that's a negotiation. You'll have preferences, and your coach will have preferences. You'll make requests that won't work from the coach's point of view. That's the natute of these conversations. It's not about making demands; it's about figuring out together what works best.

TALK ABOUT "FEEDBACK AND YOU"

There are plenty of things about how you receive feedback that aren't in your awareness. It's not as if you spend twenty-four hours a day reflecting on your feedback strengths and weaknesses, and in any event, we all have blind spots. But you are probably aware of *some* of the ways that you react to feedback—after all, you're thinking about bringing it up because something about the current process isn't working for you (including, sometimes, that you're getting no coaching at all). Whatever that something is, talk about it explicitly with the person giving you feedback. Here are slices of what that might sound like:

Subtle doesn't work with me. Be really explicit and don't worry about hurting my feelings. You won't.

I tend to get defensive at first, and then I circle back later and figure out why the feedback is helpful. So if I seem defensive, don't be put off. I'll be thinking about what you've said, even if it doesn't sound like it.

I react better when you present your advice as an idea that might help, rather than as "the obviously right answer." In that frame, I notice that I get hooked into arguing about whether it's "obvious" or "right," rather than just considering whether it's worth trying out.

Here's what I've been working on lately, in terms of self-improvement: ____. That's the area I need the most help with right now, and I've been putting other things on the back burner, even though I know I need to work on them, too.

I'm really sensitive to negative feedback. So don't give it in the middle of a presentation unless it's urgent and immediately actionable.

Put your ideas out there, explain your thinking behind them, and be open to your coach's thoughts about what you've told them.

It's easy, by the way, for coaches to dismiss your requests and concerns by thinking, *Well, sure, there's an ideal way we'd all like to hear feedback, but what really matters is the feedback itself.* And that's partly true—the conversation is not a set of obstacles around which your coach has to maneuver. But often our own observations about how we learn best can make a huge difference in our ability to take in the feedback. We're explaining our particular defensive formation not to block givers out, but to help them get through.

DISCUSS PREFERENCES, ROLES, AND MUTUAL EXPECTATIONS

Sometimes the person giving you feedback actually *is* a mentor or executive coach, or perhaps a peer or friend who is particularly inclined to give you advice. In these cases, it can be useful to talk more

broadly about feedback styles and preferences and the challenges of learning.

Three topics should be kept front and center. The first two are about the receiver:

(1) Your feedback temperament and tendencies;
(2) Growth areas you are currently working on.

The third is about the coach:
(3) Their philosophy, strengths and weaknesses, and requests.

On the following page is a set of questions that can move you into helpful territory.

It's also useful to clarify whether the coaching is confidential, how often you will get together, how you will measure progress, and what your priorities and goals might be. Get aligned on where you are going and how you will get there.

The coaches in our lives also include "accidental coaches," like your neighbor who is being a pain. Discussing roles and mutual expectations can be helpful here, too. Let's imagine that your neighbor is upset that your dog periodically finds her way into his garden. The neighbor is "coaching" you to put up a taller fence, stake the dog on a chain, or, ideally, find her a new home far, far away. Your neighbor is conveying his coaching via notes left in your mailbox.

This is not working for you. First, you're not convinced your dog is in his yard as often as the neighbor claims, but it's hard to tell since you often don't learn about it until the following day when you pick up your mail. Plus, you are surprised and put off by the hostile tone of the notes.

Whether this situation deteriorates or begins to right itself has little to do with the dog and everything to do with whether you take the initiative to coach your coach. Pick up the phone, or better yet, walk next door with the express purposes of (1) gathering more data on what's actually going on—how often your dog pays a visit, what your neighbor does when he sees her, and whether there's been any damage or particular behavior that prompts the concern; (2) coaching your neighbor on how he can best work with you; and (3) setting some mutual expectations about how you'll work together.

So you might say, "When you see her in the yard, please call me right away. When you leave a note I don't learn about it until the following day, and that makes it hard to assess why she was out in the first place." You might add, "I was hopeful that our fence was effective, but something isn't working. Give me a little time to explore whether she needs to be retrained, or whether we're going to have to come up with a better solution. I'll give you an update by the weekend." Letting the neighbor know that his concerns have gotten through, and that it

Grab Bag of Questions for Coach and Coachee

Who has given you feedback well? What was helpful about how they did it?
Have you ever gotten good advice that you rejected? Why?
Have you ever received good advice that you took years later?
What motivates you?
What disheartens you?
What's your learning style? Visual, auditory, big picture, detail oriented?
What helps you hear appreciation?
What's something you wish you were better at?
Whose feedback-receiving skills do you admire?
What did your childhood and family teach you about feedback and learning?
What did your early job experiences teach you?
What's the role of time/stages?
What's the role of mood and outlook?
What's the role of religion or spirituality?
What has been the impact of major life events? Getting married? Getting laid off or fired? Having children? Death of a parent?
What do you dislike most about coaching? About evaluation?
What helps you change?

will take you some time to learn more and sort out solutions, will help prevent escalation of the conflict.

HIERARCHY AND TRUST

Hierarchy can have an impact on coaching conversations. We've discussed in prior chapters the benefits of separating coaching and evaluation. That's hard to do when the person evaluating you is also the person who coaches you. Sometimes that's unavoidable; you can't have one spouse who coaches you and another who decides whether to stay married. But when they can be different people, they should be. It's best to have a coach who is well insulated from your compensation and career decisions.

But sometimes your coach is your boss, and there is no getting around it. In these cases you might be thinking that a "coach the coach" conversation is off limits: "I'd never talk to my boss about these kinds of things. My boss determines my future. I can't suggest that I'm anything less than a confident, fully competent person."

Certainly, you should make thoughtful choices about what you are comfortable discussing in a particular relationship. But talking about feedback doesn't require you to reveal everything (or anything) about past failures. You don't need to confess, "I was fired from my last two jobs because I made lots of costly mistakes. Can you help me with that?" You can say, "I was hired as a big-picture guy, but there are a lot of details that matter, too. Being more detail oriented is a learning edge for me. It's helpful to me if you point things out in real time so I can correct quickly."

When framing a request for feedback, talk in terms of effectiveness rather than ambition. Don't say: "Feedback on running meetings well is important to me because in five years I see myself as a vice president." Likewise, avoid empty generalities: "Feedback on running meetings is important to me because I think that's a really important skill in today's workplace." Your request for feedback should always be tied to doing your *current* job more effectively: "Feedback on running meetings is important to me because I want to use the team's time as efficiently as I can, given the upcoming merger." This puts the purpose and payoff in current terms that actually matter to both of you.

Here's something else that matters to both of you: Workers who seek out negative feedback—coaching on what they can improve—tend to receive higher performance ratings.[8] Perhaps showing an interest in learning doesn't highlight what you have to learn. It highlights how good you are at learning it.

DON'T BECOME A GIMME-FEEDBACK FANATIC

Of course, like anything, this can be taken to an extreme. Young Dan caught the "coach me" bug, and while his earnest thirst for improving was endearing at first, his repeated requests for feedback quickly became burdensome. "He wants to sit down to talk about his performance after every single client meeting," complained a coworker. "I can't take much more of this."

If you try to draft everyone around you into your personal learning army, you're going to produce burnout—and soon find your colleagues going AWOL. Asking others what they think of *you*, and how they can help *you*, is not the only way to learn. Try asking them questions about themselves: What do they think about the business problem you're facing together? Have they seen a similar problem in the past, and what mistakes have they seen people make in this situation? What gave them the insight to respond to the media the way they did this morning? People enjoy talking about their own thoughts and experiences. By tapping into their wisdom, you can learn as much as you might by asking for explicit coaching.

YOUR COACH CAN HELP YOU GET IN SYNC

Your coach wasn't born a coach, and it's unlikely that they've taken coaching lessons. They're a longshoreman or a lawyer, just like you. So they may or may not be comfortable or skilled in the role of coach, and even the best coaches will have individual strengths and weaknesses.

You might ask your coach what—if anything—they are finding challenging about the work you're doing together. Your coach might say:

I can't always tell what you're thinking when I give you suggestions. I'm not sure if you're agreeing or disagreeing, and whether you feel like you're allowed to say so if you disagree.

The firm wants women to have access to a female mentor, and I'm delighted to be yours. I grew up with three brothers and I have four sons, so this feels like a learning experience for me, too.

For me, appreciation feels like blowing smoke. I don't like getting it and I've heard I'm not particularly good at giving it. But I want to be a good coach, so let's figure this out.

WHEN THE PERSON BEING COACHED IS THE BOSS

As the years pass and you move up the ladder of success, there will be fewer people willing to take the risk of giving you candid coaching. You might get evaluation—market analysts, revenue figures, and the board can be counted on to provide that. And you might get appreciation—applause when you get up to speak, gratitude from subordinates who admire your willingness to give them some time and attention. But genuine, candid coaching becomes increasingly rare.

Being human, we tend to attribute this slow disappearance of coaching to our effectiveness and overall mastery. And to be fair, that's part of what's going on. You're the CEO or COO or C-whatever because you're good at what you're being asked to do, and you've been good at it for a long time. But everyone has shortcomings and weaknesses, and these are more likely to get in your way as the complexity of what you're doing grows. You need help to see your blind spots, which at this stage will not just bite you, but also hurt the organization.

Even if you're head of a global bank or playing in the finals at Wimbledon, you can improve with coaching. We all can. A trusted adviser can help you think through complex choices or prepare for a potential backlash.

Some forms of coaching can, in fact, come only from your subordinates. What do they know that no one else does? They know your impact on them. When they are in meetings with you, they are also in meetings with your blind spots. They see the things you do that get in the way, that undermine your message, that create extra work for them and others. They also hear from their subordinates what others in the organization think you don't understand, don't pay enough attention to, or aren't being clear about.

Our subordinates are such a valuable source of information that it's astonishing that we don't tap their knowledge more regularly. It's like crawling along in a traffic jam and ignoring the fact that you have a direct line to the traffic helicopter above—which can see the bigger picture that you can't from where you sit. They could give you the lowdown on the hot spots, pileups, and shortcuts that would get you the farthest fastest.

It's tough to get information to flow up an organization, and you might have to do a little hydraulic engineering to get it going. Why? Remember that most feedback givers are anxious about raising their concerns, *especially* upward. They worry that they will jeopardize their relationship with you—that you will disagree, be annoyed, become defensive, or retaliate. They also don't want to hurt your feelings, embarrass you, or embarrass themselves by handling the exchange badly.

When we show ourselves to be interested in and receptive to suggestions, it can be enormously refreshing. The boss is self-confident enough to ask for, and really listen to, feedback. Now, here's someone I can work with.

You might consider establishing "reverse mentor" relationships, in which you take on one or several coaches from different levels of the organization so that you can see the world, and yourself, through their eyes. What does this organization look like from the factory floor? What does it look like to the younger generation of workers and customers? What are people worried about in the Caracas or Calgary or Kuala Lumpur branches, and what do their customers think of the new global marketing push? You don't want to be buffeted by everyone else's priorities. You do want to learn how your priorities are and aren't flowing to the extremities of the organization, and what unintended effects

they are having—so that you can continually work together to adapt and correct course.

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A final thought on coaching your coach. This may sound immodest coming from the authors, but it can be useful for you and a colleague or family to read *Thanks for the Feedback* together. Not literally at the same time, reading aloud to each other over cups of cocoa. But you can choose a particular chapter and then discuss it over lunch or dinner. You don't need an agenda, and the conversation doesn't have to be about anything specific. Just talk about your thoughts and reactions to what you've read. Use the ideas here as a catalyst for conversation. Pick out a few ideas that make sense and a few that don't, and put them up for discussion. Go to our website, www.stoneandheen.com, and download our *Team Leader's Facilitation Guide*, which provides a wealth of questions to stimulate rich discussion with your team. The guide also offers coaching on how to facilitate such discussions.

If you're interested, send an e-mail to the authors. We'll do our best to respond. Let us know what's useful and what's not. And include a short, clear description of what an "In and Out Zone" defense looks like, if you're able.

INVITE THEM IN

Here's something we haven't said: letting someone far enough into your life to help you *transforms the relationship*. Not just because you learn, but because the interaction itself creates connection and shifts both of your roles inside the relationship. You become someone humble, vulnerable, and confident enough to ask for help; they become someone who has the capacity to help and who is respected and appreciated enough to be asked.

In chapter 10 we looked at why being good at setting boundaries is so crucial. You have to know when and how to keep people out of that emotional acre of yours. But just as surely, you have to know how to let them in—whether it's a well-kept garden or an old junkyard. For many of us, that's the real challenge.

Let's be honest: Everyone's acre is a mix of garden and junkyard. Your garden might be messy or manicured, the presentable bits a small plot or sprawling park. But we all have a few things in the back shed, and we could all use some help in figuring out what to do with that rusting heap of fears and those old cartons of shame we trip over regularly. Letting someone in *there*, just past the garden, is what takes courage. That's where intimacy grows.

How we handle feedback in a relationship has an enormous impact on that relationship. And changing how we handle feedback can often transform that relationship. Let's look at four common variations, where feedback was out of whack and how letting someone in made a difference.

A GOOD LISTENER ASKS FOR HELP

It wasn't until a few years ago that Roseanne noticed that her relationships were lopsided: "People come to me for help. I'm a great listener and good at helping them. And I enjoy it. But I started to see that all my conversations were about other people's problems. I knew what was going on with everyone else, but not even my closest friends knew what was going on with me."

At first she assumed that her friends and colleagues were just self-absorbed. "But now," Roseanne says, "I realize that I'm a 'slow reveal.' I don't easily volunteer information about myself and I never ask for help. I was sending signals I wasn't aware of—waving people off, telling them to stay away." Roseanne had secured the perimeter with her silence.

Roseanne sat with this realization for months. "I knew that this wasn't how I wanted things to be, and I was determined to change. I decided to work on a very specific skill: I was going to learn how to ask for help. And for a long time, deciding was as far as I got. It was actually slightly funny. I'm a person with a million problems, but somehow none of them seemed like quite the right one to get help with. And anyway, how would I know who to ask, or what it was I wanted from them? I was so unaccustomed to getting help that I didn't know where to start."

Roseanne finally came up with a strategy. She decided to ask a friend for help with something she was genuinely lousy at, but which

ultimately wasn't that important to her: rethinking her wardrobe. "And holy cow, be careful what you ask for! I hit an artery. It was as if Stacy had been suppressing her opinions about my appearance for years. 'No polka dots after thirty!' was the first thing she said. And then, 'Let's talk about your hair.' Apparently, one way to get feedback is to *ask*."

Over time, with that friend and others, and even with colleagues at work, Roseanne started letting people into the less lovely parts of her acre. She shared some of the scars that lingered from a rough childhood, and her challenges with committed relationships. Some of the feedback itself has been more useful than she anticipated. But more important, she is making deeper connections.

In letting herself be helped she is letting herself be known.

A FRUSTRATED ADVISER OPENS UP

Clay, meanwhile, was having the opposite experience from Roseanne: "A coworker of mine, Nadine, has a thirteen-year-old son. Bryan is wonderful in so many ways—a smart, funny, insightful kid. But he has never been easy. Tantrums like thunderstorms, and recently he's been turning his anger on his parents. Nadine and her husband are at a loss for how to cope, but she doesn't want any kind of advice. She vents about it and then shuts down."

Does Clay have advice? He does. But for as long as he's known Nadine, he's held his tongue: "I don't have kids and because of that I've found that people aren't very receptive to my suggestions on that subject. But before I was a geologist, I worked for several summers at a camp for troubled kids. I have this sense for what sets kids off and what helps calm them down. Maybe because I was that kid myself."

Does Clay's coworker know this about him? "She does, vaguely," he says. "And I've even brought it up by saying things like, 'Oh, yeah, I had a kid in my cabin who did that,' but Nadine cruises by it, never following up."

If we were coaching Clay as an advice giver, there's a lot we could offer him. He could be explicit about what he does and doesn't know. He could say: "I do have some ideas for what might help from my work with kids like Bryan. At the same time, I'm not a parent, and so I don't have that perspective." He could be extra appreciative of the tough work involved in parenting Bryan and explicit about autonomy—that Nadine is free to take or leave his ideas: "You've worked so hard and maybe you've tried these things. At the end of the day, you know him best. . . ."

But this is a book about feedback receiving. And it turns out that receiving feedback was just the thing to unlock the Nadine puzzle. Clay did something he never thought to do before. He asked Nadine for advice. "I was at dinner at her home," he says, "and we got on the topic of my personal life. And for the first time, I described my battles with depression. It turns out that Nadine knows quite a bit about antidepressant drugs, and so I was finding the conversation very helpful. And then out of nowhere, in this conversation about me, she started talking about Bryan. She described a recent episode, and then listened intently as I shared my theory about what might be going on with him. It was literally the first time we've ever discussed it, and she was like a sponge."

There's a coda to this story, as Clay explains: "We've talked about it since, this question of being open to advice. And this blew my mind. She had suspected I'd struggled with depression in my life, and felt like she knew things that would help me, but always thought I was uncomfortable talking about it. So she was having the same experience I was of feeling uninvited to offer help. Wrap your mind around that." Indeed.

PERFECT FEEDBACK FOR THE PERFECT PERSON

Fiona founded and runs a community health center in Kenya. For ten years she's been working around the clock to build partnerships, expand services, and train new staff. She is liked and respected in the region; people come from across Africa to learn about her community outreach model.

Recently Fiona has started to feel restless, and as new opportunities arise, she finds herself with a surprising problem: Despite working hard to train her staff, she has not groomed anyone who could take over the organization if she departed.

Once she became aware of this hole in her planning, she set about

in her usual competent way to tackle it. She made lists of skills that that person would need and started to devise strategies for how current staff might acquire them. She also began investigating where she might find new employees who might already be qualified for the role.

And then a friend from another health center asked Fiona: "What are you doing that is disabling your staff from learning?" The implication was clear: After ten years, you should already have at least a couple of people with the know-how to run the center. Fiona was offended: "*Disable* my staff? Are you kidding?" She pointed to all the training and mentoring she had done.

But the question stuck with her, needling and nudging. So one day she went to a junior staffer she knew was capable and observant and asked not whether she was hindering others, but how: "What do you see me doing that disables the staff?"

It turned out that Fiona—like many entrepreneurs—had her fingerprints on everything. In the early days this ensured quality control and consistent messaging. As the organization grew, however, her need to oversee, to direct, to manage, meant that no one could decide anything without her say-so. Staffers couldn't make their own mistakes and never learned to take initiative or trust their own judgment.

The feedback required some tough self-examination on Fiona's part, as well as a number of additional conversations inside the organization. There were three results: Fiona learned to step back and trust her staff with more responsibilities. Her relationships with her staff members were strengthened enough to make that easier to do. And finally, Fiona demonstrated that no one is perfect, not even Fiona. And that allowed everyone to loosen up, step up, and learn from mistakes more easily.

SHIFTING MIRRORS

Amy was just scolded by her boss. In front of others, on a conference call. Again.

She hangs up and immediately dials Hank, her best friend since the time they worked together as night managers at a chain of grocery stores. Amy is now the manager of a rival supermarket across town, and Hank has remained a trusted sounding board. He has heard plenty

over the last few months about Amy's new regional boss and chief antagonist, Ivan.

The latest is this: Ivan had scheduled an early call for the store managers in the region to discuss a change in shipping providers. Amy was a few minutes late dialing in, and when she clicked into the call, she caught Ivan mid-sentence saying, ". . . Amy, late as usual."

"He just has it in for me," Amy tells Hank. "It's so unprofessional. There were eighteen people on that call who got to hear his little put-down."

Later on the call they clashed again when Ivan explained that the new shipper would require authorized personnel to sign for produce. Amy pointed out that their other produce suppliers already required signatures. "Not true," Ivan corrected. "Not until now, but we'll need signatures from now on. Everyone should arrange to sign for their produce deliveries."

Amy continues with Hank: "So I told Ivan that I would forward the list of signers I already use. I just wanted to let him know that, obviously, we already had a list. And then, as if I couldn't hear, he said, 'I guess Amy really wants to be right.' It's as if Ivan can't stop himself. He's the most defensive person I've ever met, but doesn't think twice about offending anyone else." Hank listens thoughtfully, and says "yeah" and "wow" every once in a while.

When he hangs up, Hank wonders if he could have done more to help Amy hear the feedback.

We Triangulate for Comfort, but Not Coaching

Amy is doing what we all do when upset by criticism—she's reaching out for support. Venting is natural and cathartic; turning the sting of the moment into the latest "get this" story for friends and coworkers helps us connect with others and regain our balance.

But too often we stop there. We ask our friends to be supportive mirrors so that we can get recentered and feel better. But we miss the opportunity to also ask them to help us sift the feedback itself for anything we might learn.

Of course, from Amy's point of view, Ivan's actions didn't constitute

feedback; he was simply being a jerk. But extracting feedback from jerkiness is just the kind of thing friends can help you do.

Hank Has a Hunch

Later that afternoon Amy calls Hank back. She thanks him for being supportive earlier, and then makes a request: "I can usually see where people are coming from, but with Ivan, there's something going on that I don't get. I don't know if I push his buttons or if he's just this way with everyone. I need you to help me with that." She'd like Hank to shift from supportive mirror to honest mirror.

Amy's instinct is sound: In the conflict between Amy and Ivan, Hank actually does see both sides. He gets why Amy was triggered by Ivan's comments. But he's had his own experiences with Amy's wanting to be right, and Hank wonders if this is a blind spot for her. Just because Ivan is difficult doesn't mean Amy is not.

Hank observes that this isn't the first time that she and Ivan have clashed over "who is right." He sees a pattern: It's not just that Ivan is triggering Amy—Amy is also triggering Ivan. "That's true," Amy admits. "But I'm not just going to act as if he's right when he's not, especially if he's making comments about me being wrong in front of other people."

She pauses and then adds this: "You know, there was one other thing going on that I didn't mention." When Amy overheard Ivan's comment about her being "late as usual" she remained civil on the phone. But she couldn't resist sending him a text while the conference call rattled on about trucking and signatures:

Amy: Late? 2 minutes.
Ivan: 5.
Amy: Was dealing with shopper's complaint.
Ivan: Don't care. Don't be late.
Amy: 2 minutes. Maybe 3.

Returning to the call, Ivan and Amy pick up their repartee, this time about signatures and past produce practice, and again, Amy can't seem to sense when the argument has passed its expiration date.

Hank suggests that maybe there's something to this idea that Amy likes to have the last word, and that this is contributing to the Amy-Ivan conflicts. (Of course, that very instinct shows up in her conversation with Hank: "But just so you know, I really was only two minutes late," she adds before they hang up.)

Make Two Lists to Stay on Track

In his effort to be an honest mirror, Hank suggests that they make two lists—what's wrong with the feedback, and what might be right or helpful (which is a version of the containment chart we include in chapter 8). Each time Amy strays back to defending or pointing out the problems with Ivan's approach, Hank tells her to write it down in the "what's wrong" column. He then guides her back to what might be right.

Here's a sample of the notes Amy took on her napkin:

The Feedback	What's "Wrong" with the Feedback	What Might Be Right
"I guess Amy really wants to be right."	What are we, in seventh grade? Totally inappropriate to say on the call in front of everyone. Should have told me one-on-one.	I do get sucked into debating the finer points, even when it doesn't matter.
"late again"	Am I supposed to pretend he's right even when I know he's not?	The produce thing didn't matter—I just didn't like being told I was wrong in front of others, especially when I knew I was right.
"don't be late"	I was two minutes late, but I didn't miss anything. He's overreacting.	Why is it that I need to have the last word? Hmm. Dad?
		I have been late to the calls a few times. Now I'm noticing that others aren't late. Ideas to change this? Whether I was two or five minutes late matters less than that he noticed. Always better to be on time.

Writing down and discussing what's wrong frees Amy to see what might be right or valid or reasonable. The two sides of the list don't net each other out, and the point isn't for Amy to reach some grand conclusion about her interactions with Ivan, or a verdict on who was more right or more to blame. Amy is digging to learn—about herself and about her relationship with Ivan. That way, when she approaches Ivan with her thoughts, she'll have a more balanced view of what's going on, and a better sense of what might help improve the situation.

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Feedback isn't just about the quality of the advice or the accuracy of the assessments. It's about the quality of the relationship, your willingness to show that you don't have it all figured out, and to bring your whole self—flaws, uncertainties, and all—into the relationship.

13

PULL TOGETHER

Feedback in Organizations

The supply chain manager for a sheet metal company, Everett likes data.

So he was surprised when he received a load of data in his 360 report that he did not like. The information was confounding, wildly out of line with how he saw himself. He felt defensive—for himself and in the name of good data everywhere. The whole feedback endeavor, he told anyone who would listen, had been poorly executed and pointless.

And then one day—*wham!*—it hit him. "The feedback fell into place," he says. "I suddenly saw myself in a new way, and it explained so many things. Oh, *this* is why I've been struggling; *this* is where I've been wrong; *this* is what has been disrupting my marriage; *this* is where I can change." Everett now supports 360s with the zeal of the converted: "It's the only way to get successful but stubborn son of a guns like me to look at themselves."

But many of his colleagues disagree. Some found their 360 useful, but not overwhelmingly enlightening. Some found it unhelpful, and a few felt it was destructive. Everett finds this attitude regrettable: "No performance management system is perfect, but ours is really quite good. Too many of our top people are complacent. Or maybe they're just afraid to do the hard work of growing."

Pierre is also wrestling with *his* company's performance management system. The president of a retail clothing chain, Pierre took stock of the toll the system was taking on his employees: It absorbed an excessive amount of time and left people feeling demoralized and unfairly treated. "Most of the people who work here are amazing," he observes. "But the system we had in place was just not working. Everyone found it stressful. And performance issues that needed to be