

[Board feedback with Matt Mochary](#)

In my coaching, I have found that a key value-add that I can bring is increased transparency and efficiency in the communication between the Board and the CEO.

As Board Members, we want to share our knowledge and network with the founder, to help her succeed (and therefore make our investment more valuable). But we don't want to offend or embarrass that founder, so we rarely give our full critical feedback, and certainly not in the group setting of a board meeting.

As a CEO, we want to get full value (and therefore the full thoughts) out of our advisors and board members. But we often forget to ask for full critical feedback specifically, and almost never do we ask for it in writing.

Both the withholding from the board members, and not asking for feedback from the founder, causes an inefficiency in the communication. With this one-time exercise, hopefully we will eliminate that inefficiency from our collective communication.

The exercise:

1. We schedule 50-minutes together. All board members, the CEO and Matt.
2. Matt creates a shared Doc, and shares a pre-read: This doc (3 min) and [Feedback](#) [15 min]
 - a. If you are the type of person that likes to do pre-work, please do Step 3a before the meeting.
 - b. If you run best by acting in the moment, you can do Step 3a live in the meeting.
3. During that meeting/call
 - a. Each board member writes down (in a private note that only they have access to, so that they are not influenced by each other's writings) what actions the CEO has done that they LIKE, and what actions they WISH THAT the CEO would do (or not do). [10 minutes]
 - i. Please give the rawest WISH THAT feedback that you can think of. The CEO will unpack only the rawest of this feedback. Yes, it's a competition!
 - ii. During this writing time, the CEO can respond to emails.
 - b. At 10 minutes, all paste into the common doc.
 - c. The CEO reads through all of the feedback. [10 minutes]
 - i. She first reads the LIKES. Summarizes and gives thanks for each.
 - ii. She then reads all the WISH THATs.
 - d. The CEO picks the juiciest WISH THAT feedback and fully unpacks it [10 minutes]
 - i. CEO thanks the feedback giver for being willing to share this information. It took bravery.

- ii. CEO summarizes what she thinks she read, until the author says “That’s right.” CEO then asks “Is there more?”
 - iii. CEO declares whether or not she accepts the feedback. (There is no requirement to accept. She only does so if the feedback resonates with her.)
 - iv. If the CEO accepts the feedback, then she declares what action she will take. (She can also brainstorm with the feedback-giver on what the best actions would be.)
- e. The CEO continues to unpack the other juicy WISH THATs until the meeting time is over, or all of the juicy feedback has been processed. [20 minutes]

It is important for all to recognize that board members are highly qualified to give feedback in some areas (the effectiveness and efficiency of the board meeting, their interaction with the CEO), and less qualified in other areas (how to run the company). It doesn’t mean that board members shouldn’t give feedback in areas that they are not as qualified in, it just means the CEO will be putting that feedback through a more stringent filter to see whether it resonates with him/her.

Why is it necessary to have Matt attend this? This seems very simple and could be done without Matt.

Absolutely, it could be. But there is a reason that we don’t give full feedback. We don’t know how the recipient (in this case the CEO) will receive that feedback. There is a chance that she might get very angry, defensive, hurt, etc and then take the feedback as an attack, not a gift. This rarely happens, but sometimes it does. And it is why Matt is there.

If this happens, then Matt will jump in and help the CEO quickly release their anger and see the feedback for the gift that it is. That is Matt’s only role. Think of him as a lion-tamer. Most likely, the lion will stay in the cage, and Matt won’t be needed. But if he is needed, we’ll all be glad that he’s there.

Notes:

1. I have done this exercise at Reddit, Sonder, Mattermost, etc. And each of those boards and CEOs have found it to be worthwhile.
2. The full version of this exercise takes 50 minutes. We can do a quick-and-dirty version that takes 30 minutes. But the shorter version rarely feels as successful as the full version.
3. If the exercise proves to be useful for all, then here is the follow-up:
 - a. Ask for written feedback at the end of every board meeting.
 - b. CEO to treat all feedback as the gift it is.
 - c. After the CEO has read the feedback (can be after the board meeting), let the board know what actions she will be taking against that feedback.

- d. At the beginning of the next board meeting, let the board know which of these actions she has completed, and what the results were.
- e. If the board members are open to it, CEO gives written feedback to each of the board members in their next interaction (likely 1-1).