GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK; IT WILL NEVER BE EASY, BUT IT CAN BE BETTER[3]

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We live in a world filled with feedback devices. Some feedback devices are "coupled," that is, the system *automatically* responds to feedback signals by making changes. A thermostat is one familiar example of this. However, many feedback devices merely provide us with information. Is then up to us to interpret that information and to decide how we want to use it.

"Uncoupled" feedback sources include such things as bathroom scales, fuel gauges, mirrors, tape recorders. Still others include ways in which people behave toward us – what they say and don't say, do and don't do, how they look, sound, etc. These "uncoupled" indicators may be either unused or misused by us – particularly when our interpretation of the data is colored by our hopes, fears, needs, and desires.

When I'm driving, for example, I have a number of devices feeding back to me information about my car: its speed, engine temperature, oil pressure, fuel level. But I must interpret what that information "means" and make decisions as to what I want to do with it. I may, for example, note that the fuel gauge needle is low, but choose to ignore it for a while; or I may convince myself that it's broken; or I may play a game with it, to see how far I can go before I heed the information and pull into a gas station. I'm not likely to cover the gauge up because it threatens or offends me; nor am I likely to wrench the needle from the "E" to the "F" (thereby magically filling the tank!)

Similarly with a bathroom scale: if I think I'm not going to like what it tells me, I may not get on it at all. Or, if I'm dieting, I may weigh myself continuously and risk stressing myself out of any chance of staying with the diet. Or, I may convince myself that it "weighs heavy." Mirrors? I can avoid them, except when I'm "feeling thin" or "nicely rounded." And I know full well, when I listen to myself on tape, that "that doesn't sound like me."

Similarly, with the feedback we get from people with whom we interact: we can play games with it, refuse to believe it, misinterpret it, etc. Most of us have, at one time or another, tried to cover up the "negative feedback" gauge ("I don't want to talk about it!") or to wrench the pointer from "empty" to "full' (you're just upset with me; it's nowhere near as bad as you say it is.") or we choose to ignore it. Many of these behaviors can be grouped under the general heading of "defensiveness;" denying, explaining, justifying, fighting, surrendering – everything but *dealing* with the feedback as information that may have great value to us if we can let it in and effectively use it.

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[3] NTL **Reading Book For Human Relations Training**, 1982 NTL Institute, Alexandria, VA.

For reasons having mostly to do with our upbringing, we want to look "good" to the world (no matter how much we may deny it), and in the interest of doing this we may try to shut out information that runs counter to the much-desired image. We fear information that "disconfirms" our "OKness." This fear causes us to behave in ways that cuts us off from feedback (either because it causes people to stop giving it to us or because it keeps us from being able to hear it) which is a pity, because game-free feedback can have great value. It's one of the major sources of information by which we can know how we're perceived by others, develop clarity about why our relationships are what they are (for good or bad) and decide what changes, if any, we want to make in our behaviors to improve the quality of our relationships.

There's another problem, too. Not only are many of us afraid of feedback, but we lack skills related to sending and receiving it. Few people have an opportunity to learn feedback skills. So, we more or less, do it the way it was done to us. And the way it was done to us is often what makes us fear it in the first place!

One way to break out of this cycle is to learn some feedback concepts. For example, what constitutes effective (i.e., helpful, non-gameplaying) feedback? And then practice those concepts, either in a setting which validates such experimentation or with people at home with whom we can share information and who we can use as a resource as we improve our skills.

Definition

For our purposes here I'm defining feedback as information that flows between people that has to do with their interaction in the "here and now."

Telling someone the time or that you'd rather go to a movie than a baseball game is not feedback in the sense that I'm using the term. It's just *information*. I define *effective feedback* as information that: (1) can be heard by the receiver – as evidenced by the fact that s/he does not get defensive (2) keeps the relationship intact, open and healthy –though not devoid of conflict or pain and (3) validates the feedback process in future interactions – rather than avoiding it because "last time it hurt so much."

Further, feedback does not assume that the giver is totally right and the receiver wrong. Instead, it's an invitation to interaction and has some give-and-take to it. Also, it is a behavior that is inappropriate in interactions with people who do not have some significance in our lives, but all right in interactions that we want to have duration and importance.

Criteria for Effective Feedback

Following are 9 criteria for effective feedback. If this list sounds intimidating, keep in mind that some of them are easy to start using (once you're aware). In addition, you probably won't need to concern yourself with all of them and may find yourself focusing on a cluster of four or five which you realize are problems for you. Also, I'm providing the "flip side" of each criterion – things we do which are not effective and trap us into games

and relational confusions. It may be that if you can just stop doing **some** of these things, you'll have made significant progress.

To repeat, that's a lot to keep track of, especially given the fact that most of us have had extensive training in how *not* to give feedback. Here are some suggestions you may find helpful:

- Find out which ineffective feedback behaviors you most want to get rid of. You can do this by paying careful attention to what you do in significant interactions; you can also find out by asking the "challengers" (and others) in your personal and work groups if they can point out any criteria that you violate frequently. Share the list with them if that would help. Work on those – perhaps two or three. Try to **stop** doing the ineffective things, at the very least.

- Don't expect miracles. Disconfirming feedback almost always carries some sting no matter how skillfully given; and some people are more easily stung than others are. Relationships marked by a relatively high degree of open, competent feedback are likely to be richer, more complex, more interesting than those marked by little feedback or game playing. They are also, however, likely to be more prickly and intense and they require more time and energy.

- If for one reason or another (fear of punishment, risk of losing a relationship you're not ready to lose, lack of confidence in your skills, etc.) you think you don't want to try to be more open and use more effective feedback behaviors, then *don't*. But pay attention to the choice you are making – there may be some important learning in it for you. Or, you may want to test out some feedback in very small increments, to see what happens.

- The 9 criteria are useful to you as a *receiver* of feedback as well as a giver. You may decide that you can't/won't give much feedback to another in a given relationship. OK. But do try to use what you've learned as a means of "managing" feedback you receive. If someone tells you you're being obnoxious, you may elect to be hurt or angry, or you may choose to be curious and ask for descriptive information: "What am I doing that causes you to say that?" You can also try to help others "own" their feelings, rather than allowing them to shuffle them off onto others ("people are talking....."). You can help the sender explore his/her feelings (active listening is useful here) or clarify for you (and perhaps for him/herself) the *consequences* of the behavior being discussed. In short, if you know something about effective feedback skills (and if you can avoid getting into a defensive posture) you may be able to be helpful to the person giving you feedback, so that the two of you are

problem solving rather than attacking/defending. This will help you too, in that it will get you much clearer feedback or it will indicate what "game" the sender is playing.

- Don't become a feedback addict. Sometimes people get excited about new learnings and use them all the time in every place. This can wear thin very quickly. Not every event needs to be worked through. Not every utterance needs to be perfect. Remember to allow for some slippage in your relationships; take small risks, be willing to "approximate," and see what happens. Above all, don't use others as guinea pigs on which to practice your skills.

- The feedback process works best when it involves people who are – at least in that interaction – equals. If one person is "up" (dominate, faultless, containing all virtue) and the other "down" (passive, the culprit or villain of the piece) it is likely to turn into one of a number of games, as the "down" person attempts (usually without realizing it) to equalize the power between them and to gain what might be called

psychological parity. If you can recognize that what began as a feedback interaction between equals has moved to a "helpless me" or "awful me" or "you're one too" or "but you don't understand," or any of a variety of behaviors that might be lumped under the term "attack/defense," you may be able to alter the interaction's direction by having both you and the other person look at what's happening. Note well: both you and the other person. For as long as the burden is on the other, you're maintaining or increasing your advantage and promoting an escalation of the power equalization efforts.

By now you may be muttering, "but it's so complicated; and it sounds like hard work; and it also sounds risky." Yes. And the same can be said of many other things that are important to us. It is, I believe, a matter of *valuing*. If I value clear, open relationships, if I value the others with whom I share those relationships, and – most important, I think – if I value *myself* in those relationships, then I may find that I have no choice but to do the hard work, take the risks, suffer the losses, and be enriched by the gains.

Effective Feedback	Ineffective Feedback
1. Describes the behavior that led to the feedback: "You are finishing my sentences for me..."	Uses evaluative/judgmental statements: "You're being rude." Or, generalized ones: "You're trying to control the conversation."
2. Comes as soon as appropriate after the behavior – immediately if possible; later if events make that necessary (something more important going on, you need time to "cool down,").	Is delayed, saved up and "dumped." Also known as ambushing. The more time that passes, the "safer" it is to give feedback. Induces guilt and anger in the receiver because after time has passed there's usually not much s/he can do about it.
3. Is direct from sender to receiver.	Indirect or ricocheted: "Tom, how do you feel when Jim cracks his knuckles?" also known as "let's you and him fight."
4. Includes the sender's real feelings about the behavior, insofar as they are relevant to the feedback: "I get frustrated when I'm trying to make a point and you keep finishing my sentences."	Feelings are concealed, denied or misrepresented: feelings are "smuggled" into the interaction by being sarcastic, sulking, competing to see who's "right." Other indicators: speculations on the receiver's intentions, motivations or psychological "problems:" "You're driving me nuts;" "You're just trying to see how much you can get away with;" "You have a need to get even with the world."
5. Is checked for clarity, to ensure that the receiver fully understands what's being conveyed: "Do you understand what I mean when I say you seem to be sending me a double message?"	Not checked. Sender assumes clarity or, often, is *not interested* in whether the receiver understands fully: "Stop interrupting me with 'yes, buts!'"

Effective Feedback
(con't)

6. Asks relevant questions which seek information (has a problem-solving quality) with the receiver knowing why the information is sought and having a clear sense that the sender does not know the answer.

7. Specifies consequences of the behavior: "When you keep finishing my sentences, I get frustrated and want to stop talking to you." "If you keep finishing my sentences, I won't want to spend much time talking with you in the future."

8. Is solicited or desired by the receiver.

9. Refers to behaviors about which the receiver can do something if s/he wants to: "I wish you'd stop interrupting me."

Ineffective Feedback
(con't)

Asks questions that are really statements: "Do you think I'm going to let you get away with that?" Or, questions that sound like traps: "How many times have you been late this week?" Experts at the "question game" can easily combine the two: "How do you think that makes me feel?" "Do you behave that way at home *too*?"

Provides vague consequences: "That kind of behavior is going to get you in trouble." Or specifies no consequences, substituting, other kinds of leverage, such as "shoulds:" "You shouldn't do that."

Is imposed on the receiver, often for his/her "own good."

Refers to behavioral over which the receiver has little or no control: "I wish you'd laugh at my jokes."