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Feedback Loops: Surviving the Feedback Desert

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Surviving the Feedback Desert

The Illinois Bar Journal is pleased to introduce Feedback Loops, a quarterly column that explores how to give and receive high-quality feedback.



►► ONE OF THE BIGGEST COMPLAINTS THAT STUDENTS HAVE ABOUT LAW SCHOOL AND THAT YOUNG LAWYERS HAVE ABOUT THE WORKPLACE: THESE ENVIRONMENTS OFTEN FEEL LIKE FEEDBACK DESERTS.

“Another one of life’s beautiful F- Words is feedback, which is the ultimate growth hormone if you’re willing to take it.”

—Julie Lythcott-Hain, “Your Turn”

I ASK MY LAW STUDENTS THE FOLLOWING set of parallel questions on the very first day of “Feedback Loops,” a course I have been teaching for the past couple of years:

- What did you get better at last year?
How do you know?
- What should you get better at this year?
How do you know?

I created the course to address one of the biggest complaints that students have about law school and that young lawyers have about the workplace: These environments often feel like feedback deserts.

My criteria for what counts as a feedback desert has three parts.

1. You rarely get quality feedback.
2. Nobody has explained how you should process the little feedback you do get or how to get more (and better) feedback in the future.
3. You’ve never been taught how to provide useful feedback to other people or, importantly, to yourself.

This new column is designed to help with each of those issues. We’ll learn how to solicit feedback. We’ll learn how to deliver feedback. And we’ll learn how to interpret feedback.

We’ll also experiment with a wide range of feedback frameworks, because not every situation calls for the same *type* of feedback. Personalities differ. Time constraints differ. So do factors such as what’s at stake, how many people are involved, and whether the feedback will be written, spoken, or communicated in

some other way. Feedback works best when it is carefully tailored to the specific needs, goals, and interests of the recipient. Of all the times I have talked with people about the particular kind of feedback they’d like to receive, not once has the answer been: “The most generic feedback possible.”

That’s probably because generic feedback is often useless feedback, and it deprives people of key developmental guidance. How can you improve as an associate, as a partner, as a judge, as a prosecutor, or certainly as a boss if you’re not given a clear sense of what you’re doing wrong, what you’re doing right, and what steps are needed to reach the next level of performance? Upward trajectory is rarely fueled by vague, cookie-cutter coaching.

Robin Ely of the Harvard Business School has made a similar point. “Every employee deserves direct, specific, behavioral feedback,” she explained on an episode of the podcast “Women at Work” back in 2018. “All employees need that in order to develop and advance, reach their full potential, thrive, [and] be successful in their organization.”¹

The episode highlighted research done by Stanford’s Shelley Correll and Caroline Simard that found evidence of a troubling discrepancy between the quality of feedback male employees receive and the quality of feedback female employees receive.² The results of that research were published in an article called “Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back.” In it, Correll and Simard document how

1. Women at Work, *We Deserve Better Than “Attagirl,”* Harv. Bus. Rev. (Oct. 9, 2018), law.isba.org/3JsQyR5.

2. The quality of feedback that transgender employees receive was outside the scope of Correll and Simard’s study. But anyone interested in learning more about that issue might check out law.isba.org/3JAFtxD.



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female employees are “systematically less likely to receive specific feedback tied to outcomes, both when they receive praise and when the feedback is developmental. In other words, men are offered a clearer picture of what they are doing well and more-specific guidance of what is needed to get to the next level.”³

The consequences of this discrepancy can be immense, especially when it comes to promotions. “Without specific, documented business accomplishments, it is difficult for a manager to make the case for advancement,” Correll and Simard note. “Conversely, if a business objective was missed, a lack of frank feedback deprives women of the opportunity to hit the mark next time.”

Ely, a Harvard Business School professor, shares Correll and Simard’s concern. “If women are not getting [helpful] feedback,” she says, “then they’re less likely

to thrive. They’re less likely to advance. They’re not going to be developed.”⁴

Several steps can be taken to address this issue. Here are a few that Correll and Simard offer:

Be specific: “Before you begin evaluations, either written or verbal, outline the specific criteria you are employing to evaluate individuals. Articulate the precise results or behaviors that would demonstrate mastery. Use the same criteria for all employees at this level.”

Be goals- and outcome-based: “Systematically tie feedback—either positive or developmental—to business goals and outcomes. If you find yourself giving feedback without tying it to outcomes (e.g., ‘People like working with you’), ask yourself whether you can further tie the feedback to specific results (e.g., ‘You are effective at building team outcomes. You successfully resolved the

divide between the engineering team and the product team on which features to prioritize in our last sprint, leading us to ship the product on time.’).”

Be consistent: “Strive to write reviews of similar lengths for all employees. This helps ensure a similar level of detail—and therefore of specifics—for everyone.”

My law students and I have developed an additional tactic, particularly for when the goal is to provide quick, easy-to-implement feedback on somebody’s presentation or piece of writing. We call it “Keep/Cut.” To learn how it works, check out the December issue of the IBJ, when this column will next appear. **IBJ**

3. Shelley Correll & Caroline Simard, *Research: Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back*, Harv. Bus. Rev. (2016), law.isba.org/3zKtmKW.

4. Women at Work, *We Deserve Better Than “Attagirl,”* Harv. Bus. Rev. (Oct. 9, 2018), law.isba.org/3JsQyR5.