Feedback Loops: Keep/Cut

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"The acquisition of skills requires a regular environment, an adequate opportunity to practice, and rapid and unequivocal feedback about the correctness of thoughts and actions." —Daniel Kahneman, “Thinking, Fast and Slow”

In the first installment of this new column on feedback in the September Illinois Bar Journal, we began to address the pernicious problem of vague feedback—that unhelpful, empty-calories form of (non)guidance that deprives people of learning what they’re currently doing well and what they need to fix. (See “Surviving the Feedback Desert,” law.isba.org/3TPvOH9.) Without concrete, explicit guidance, it can be really tough to grow and improve.

Which is why my law students and I have developed a feedback system called “Keep/Cut,” particularly for those situations when we think that there is a high risk that people’s feedback on, say, a document or presentation will be too general, rambling, and wishy-washy. We limit the comment choices to two straightforward options:

- What should we keep?
- What should we cut?

Neither of these questions is particularly fancy or innovative. But both have the virtue of producing responses that satisfy what Robin Ely of Harvard Business School says are the three elements that distinguish effective feedback from not-so-effective feedback:

1) The feedback should be direct.
2) The feedback should be specific.
3) The feedback should be behavioral.

When, for example, my students and I suggest that someone should “keep” a comma or “cut” a slide, we’re giving the person feedback that is both direct and specific. There aren’t any layers of passive aggressiveness to sort through, nor any sugarcoating to discount. It’s clear what the feedback is recommending the person do.

It’s also clear—and this is the behavioral part—that the feedback is about actions the person can take, not aspects of their character that they must radically transform. Whether you keep a comma or cut a slide has very little bearing on your identity or core personality. The focus isn’t on who you are (or need to become). The focus is on steps you can use to improve.

Feedback that has the opposite orientation—feedback that requires a more fundamental internal metamorphosis—is likely to face considerably stiffer resistance. Try telling a chronically anxious associate who is preparing for their first deposition not to be so nervous. You may even stress them out more.

“Keep/Cut” avoids that problem. If you instead say to the associate, “Keep the follow-up question about the business partner” or “Cut the section about the brother’s stock options,” you’re not forcing them to change as a person. They can stay anxious. They can stay stressed. No major psychological overhaul is required. You’re simply offering your views in a way that is at once helpfully blunt and generously nonjudgmental. In the world of feedback, that’s a rare (and welcome) combination of qualities.

Payoff and prep work

Part of the reason I like “Keep/Cut” so much is because I’m selfish. I personally benefit from the technique pretty much every day.
One way to understand this process is through the words of Alexander Chee, who teaches in the creative writing department at Dartmouth. Here’s how he describes the awakening of his own editorial powers in “How to Write an Autobiographical Novel,” which was named a best book of 2018 by a wide range of publications, including The Washington Post, New York magazine, Publisher’s Weekly, and Time. “I felt I finally understood what I was doing—how I could make choices that made the work better or worse, line by line. After over a year of feeling lost, this new feeling was like when your foot finds ground in dark water. Here, you think. Here I can push.”

The nice thing about “Keep/Cut” is that it provides a set of terms through which you can narrow and systematize the type of choices Chee eventually learned to spot, the ones that “made the work better or worse, line by line.” Find a few things to keep. Find a few things to cut. Then continue doing that draft after draft. You’ll gradually prune and prioritize your way to a significantly improved final product.

The payoff is particularly big in meetings. There, “Keep/Cut” provides a dual advantage.

1) It lowers the barrier to conversational entry for people who are more reserved. The simple menu of options—you can either pick “Keep” or you can pick “Cut”—gives even the quietest people some participatory momentum.

2) It imposes useful constraints on people who tend to ramble. There isn’t a whole lot of room for digressions or grandstanding when all you are being asked to do is say “Keep” or “Cut” and support your selection with a sentence or two of explanation. A comment that begins “Keep because _______” rarely leads to unproductive pontificating.

The technique is similarly valuable in one-on-one situations, especially if the person looking for feedback has already flagged the spots they’re trying to decide to either keep or cut.

I really appreciate, for instance, when someone who wants me to review a draft of their brief or contract takes the time to direct my attention toward specific paragraphs, sentences, or words they’d like me to target. Attaching the document and just saying “Any thoughts?” or “What do you think?” isn’t that helpful.

By doing some prep work themselves—even if merely to highlight a few areas of particular importance—the person can significantly increase the efficiency of the whole exchange. I, as the deliverer of the feedback, won’t waste time on unimportant sections; and they, as the recipient of the feedback, will get comments that address their primary concerns. Nobody wins when there’s a feedback mismatch.

**Internal impact**

Perhaps the biggest advantage of “Keep/Cut” is internal. Once you get enough practice providing “Keep/Cut” feedback on other people’s content, you begin to anticipate similar feedback when crafting your own content. Excess becomes easier to spot and eliminate. Key points stand out as valuable assets worth protecting. Edit by edit, your revision radar becomes more powerful and more precise.

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