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Feedback Loops: E-D-I-T (Continued)

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►► THE BEST “TRY”
FEEDBACK OFTEN COMES FROM PEOPLE WHO THINK DIFFERENTLY THAN WE DO, WHETHER BECAUSE THEY’RE IN A SEPARATE PRACTICE GROUP, A SEPARATE PROFESSION, OR A SEPARATE DEMOGRAPHIC COHORT.



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E-D-I-T (Continued)

You provide the best feedback when you hunt for suggestions that fit the needs of the occasion.

I often find when I’m working that ... it’s somebody else’s suggestion or intervention that moves the work forward.

—Conceptual artist Glenn Ligon, “Art21: History”

IN THE “FEEDBACK LOOPS” COLUMN **BACK** in March, we introduced the “E-D-I-T” framework:

- Find something to **E**liminate.
- Find something to **D**ecrease.
- Find something to **I**ncrease.
- Find something to **T**ry.

This new column will discuss each category in more depth. (For Patrick Barry’s March Feedback Loops column, “E-D-I-T,” see law.isba.org/41XFMKP.)

Eliminate

A good starting point for getting feedback, especially on your writing, is to give people your draft and ask them, “What should I eliminate?”

The historian Edward Countryman once praised Gordon Wood’s classic study “The Creation of the American Republic” by declaring that “the book could not have been one word shorter.” But that assessment is rarely true of even the briefest tweet—let alone the needlessly protracted motions, contracts, and memos that continually clog up our computer screens and burden our brains. More often, the experience of reading these bloated productions causes a reaction similar to what the 18th-century literary legend Samuel Johnson once said about John Milton’s epic poem “Paradise Lost,” which consists of over 10,000 lines of blank verse: “None ever wished it longer.”

So, the next time you have somebody review a piece you’ve written, encourage them to go hunting for any sentence, section, or paragraph that seems superfluous. Offer to treat them to coffee if they can trim your draft by at least 20 words. Bump the reward up to lunch or dinner if they can reduce it by more than 50. The hit to your wallet will be far outweighed by the compositional payoff.

Decrease

Suppose two of your coworkers are planning a conference and want your input on the calendar of events, especially the various panel discussions they’ve scheduled. The speakers have been booked; the topics confirmed. The appropriate feedback is therefore not “Eliminate”—complete erasure would be too drastic. What’s needed are more measured and flexible suggestions.

That’s where the “Decrease” feedback comes in. It pushes you to look for ways to strategically shrink, clip, condense, tighten, lower, or shorten whatever you’re evaluating, while leaving most of the material intact. Applied to the conference, that might mean shaving 15 minutes from the panel ending right before lunch, especially given that hungry audiences are rarely attentive audiences. It might also mean cutting the 20 minutes originally allotted for Q & A down to 10. Small savings spread across multiple domains can have a big impact.

Increase

“Eliminate” and “Decrease” are about reduction. The “Increase” category focuses on amplification. What can be leveraged that is already working well for you? A negotiation

strategy? A mentoring relationship? A method you use to prepare for client meetings? You're on the hunt, in other words, for what Chip Heath of Stanford University and Dan Heath of Duke University call "bright spots."

"When it's time for change," they write in "Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard":

... we must look for bright spots—the first signs that things are working, the first precious As and Bs on our report card. We need to ask ourselves a question that sounds simple but is, in fact, deeply unnatural: What's working and how can we do more of it?

An example the Heaths give is a solutions-based therapy approach taken by John Murphy, a high-school counselor in Covington, Kentucky. Faced with a ninth grader named Bobby who was struggling behaviorally and academically in pretty much all his classes, Murphy didn't go through each of Bobby's bad grades one by one and try to diagnose Bobby's litany of problems. Murphy, wisely, went searching for a bright spot.

"Tell me," Murphy said to Bobby during one session, "about the times at school when you don't get in trouble as much." Bobby then mentioned that he rarely gets in trouble in Ms. Smith's class. So Murphy probed for more details. He wanted to know what was different about Ms. Smith's class. Were the assignments different? Was the way Ms. Smith treated Bobby different? What explained this positive outlier?

The answer turned out to be several factors, the most important of which Murphy shared with Bobby's other teachers. Improvements quickly followed. "Over the next three months," the Heath brothers report:

Bobby's rate of being sent to the principal's office for a major infraction decreased by 80 percent. He also made striking progress on day-to-day behavior Before solutions-focused therapy, his teachers typically rated his performance as acceptable in only one or two out of six class periods per day. After solutions-focused therapy, he was rated as acceptable in four or five of the six periods.

A key part of this story is Murphy's decision to reach out to Bobby's other

teachers once he learned about Bobby's success in Ms. Smith's class. It's not enough to recognize a bright spot. The point is to spread it—or, in the language of the E-D-I-T framework, to "Increase" it. Think of the process as sort of like upping your investment in something that has consistently given you a really good rate of return.

Try

The fourth and final category in the E-D-I-T framework, "Try," is designed to foster experimentation and innovation. Introducing fresh perspectives—even if they don't ultimately get adopted—is the main aim.

Consider again the example of feedback on a piece of writing. If you're the person giving feedback, you might say something like:

- "Try switching paragraph four with paragraph three."
- "Try including a chart on page two."
- "Try a more direct opening sentence."

If you're instead the person requesting feedback, a set of guiding questions might be helpful:

- "Is there a different structure I should try?"
- "Is there a different example I should try?"
- "Is there a different ending I should try?"

The goal, in both scenarios, is to uncover approaches and angles you haven't yet considered. "One thing a person cannot do, no matter how rigorous his analysis or heroic his imagination," wrote the Nobel Prize-winning economist Thomas Schelling in an 1987 essay, "is to draw up a list of things that would never occur to him."

That's why the best "Try" feedback often comes from people who think differently than we do, whether because they're in a separate practice group, a separate profession, or a separate demographic cohort. It's also why the topic of the next Feedback Loops column will be the importance of having more than just one or two people you consistently turn to for feedback. What you want is a diverse and dynamic "Feedback Board of Directors." 