Feedback Loops: Appreciators, Coaches, & Evaluators

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Appreciators, Coaches, & Evaluators

Assembling your own Feedback Board of Directors

“You SHOULD ASK FOR FEEDBACK” from a number of different sources—people you trust both to respect your ideas and also to give you honest criticism.” —Kelly Clancy, “Feedback From Multiple Sources,” Rutgers School of Graduate Studies (July 29, 2013).

No individual person is likely to be able to satisfy all of our feedback needs. Which is why I tell my students to assemble a “Feedback Board of Directors.” Focus in particular, I tell them, on recruiting people who can collectively provide what Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen of Harvard Law School identify as the three basic forms of feedback in their book “Thanks for the Feedback”:

- Appreciation: someone who applauds your effort and performance.
- Coaching: someone who shows you a better way to do something.
- Evaluation: someone who tells you where you stand.

Appreciation

Who’s your biggest cheerleader? I’m not talking about a sycophant who gives you (and potentially a lot of other people) empty praise. “A skillful flatterer is a most delightful companion if you can keep him all to yourself,” notes Charles Dickens in “Nicholas Nickleby.” But “his taste becomes very doubtful when he takes to complimenting other people.”

What you want instead is someone who recognizes and can articulate your unique value—the useful skills you have, the positive behaviors you demonstrate, the interesting perspectives you contribute. Appreciation feedback is a lot more effective when it identifies reproducible actions.

Telling me “Your presentation was excellent” makes me feel good and gives me practical guidance on how I can keep producing quality presentations in the future. It’s a more affirming version of “constructive criticism.” It’s a “constructive compliment.” Dan Cable, a professor of organizational behavior at the London Business School, suggests taking an additional step. Building off research that has shown the benefits of taking time to notice and reflect on what other people consider to be the best version of yourself, he recommends seeking out folks who can help you create a personal “highlight reel.” The process involves asking your closest friends, coworkers, and family members to describe moments when you have really impressed them and made a big, positive difference in their lives. “Once you can see how others perceive you when you make your best impact,” Cable explains in a 2020 article for the Harvard Business Review, “you’ll be more likely to maximize and build upon the unique strengths that make you exceptional.”

Coaching

As nice as it can be to be told what you do well, a lot of opportunity for growth comes from being told what you can do better. So, the second type of feedback you’ll want your Feedback Board of Directors to provide is coaching feedback. Seek out people who can teach you how to improve.

That’s what the award-winning surgeon, writer, and public health researcher Atul Gawande did. “I’ve been a surgeon for eight years,” he notes at the very beginning of “Personal Best,” his essay in the Oct. 3, 2011, New Yorker that explores the value that coaching feedback can add. “For the past couple of them, my performance in the operating room has reached a plateau. I’d like to think it’s a good thing—I’ve arrived at my professional peak. But mainly it seems as if I’ve just stopped getting better.”