Feeding team success

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The art of giving and facilitating effective team feedback

We all know how much feedback about performance or behaviors is important for a team to function well. But, giving and receiving feedback is a practice that requires explicit attention, skills that must be learned, and practice. This article provides recommendations based on my prior work on how best to provide feedback to teams.

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In today's fast-paced and ever-changing environment, we want teams to adapt, learn, and innovate. However, teams are not perfect on their first day. They learn to become high performing. For that to happen, we need to support them at key points of their team trajectories so they can make smart adjustments over time. Besides explaining why some teams thrive and others disappoint, research and practice have questioned possible ways to move entire teams forward. Providing "effective" feedback, conceived as information concerning teams' actions, events, processes, or behaviors relative to task completion or teamwork (London & Sessa, 2006), is one of the frequent answers. Unquestionably, leaders, coaches, and trainers know that they can motivate teams by providing feedback. Nevertheless, they might not be aware that they can also help teams learn from feedback to improve their teamwork. And, teams that enhance their teamwork are 20% to 25% more likely to succeed (LePine Piccolo, Jackson, Mathieu, & Saul, 2008). Additionally, the latest employee performance management trends companies are turning to are the increased use of teams, networks of teams, and "superteams" integrating humans and technology; a shift from rewards based on work output to rewards based on capability development; the consideration of team-based work in the company reward strategies; assessment of employees' ability to cope with constant change; and a tighter feedback calendar cycle (Deloitte, 2020).

These trends suggest that teams should not be waiting for their annual review to find out how they have performed and what they can do to develop their capabilities. Instead, modern organizations should embed feedback as a key component of their daily culture. But, feedback itself is not a magic bullet. In a society where the demand on our time is rapidly increasing, learning moments in teams are sparse. Turning teams into high-performing and learning entities takes conscious effort from the team and support from facilitators. To further develop a team's capabilities, companies should

implement better designed feedback interventions and coaching. In order to realize such feedback interventions, this article advances several recommendations based on my own empirical work.

Do not assume you give "enough" feedback

Generally, feedback givers and receivers have different perceptions of the quality of feedback interventions, whereas congruent feedback perceptions are likely to contribute to an effective update of feedback, and thus learning gains such as improved collaboration and increased performance (Gabelica & Popov, 2020). Feedback givers tend to perceive feedback they provide more favorably than feedback receivers do, and they have little insight in receivers' perspectives (e.g., how teams feel and think about feedback). Teams usually claim they do not get enough nor "good enough" feedback.

If feedback is not frequent and/or is not perceived as being useful, they will not be able monitor their progress to build on what's working and repair what isn't. Conversely, teams valuing feedback they receive are more likely to modify their strategies and behaviors (Walter & Van Der Vegt, 2013). In a survey study, 357 team workers rated the overall effectiveness of team-level feedback they received as low (Hey, Pietruschka, Bungard, & Joens, 2000). In fact, they felt that only a part of the feedback helped them perform and collaborate better. They also indicated that feedback was not regular, nor given immediately after a certain performance or behavior, and was not received directly nor it was specific enough. Yet, we found in our review study (Gabelica et al., 2012), that the most effective feedback in teams was specific, well-timed, regular, non-threatening, shared, directed at teams it targets, and fairly distributed amongst team members. Importantly, next to trying to provide high quality feedback, we should ask teams if they perceived it this way. Monitoring team members' perceptions of feedback is crucial to ensure its implementation. We may have to probe for specifics:

"how has feedback about your performance on Project X helped you better coordinate?" Also, we should look for signs that indicate whether team members have positive feedback handling intentions following feedback delivery. Do they seek our input and clarifications about feedback? Do they voice how they feel and think about feedback? While we like to believe that the feedback we provide is perceived as relevant and useful, we should monitor for signs to the contrary.

Provide feedback about team processes

My prior work shows that giving performance feedback can help teams perform better (Gabelica, Van den Bossche, De Maeyer, Segers, & Gijselaers, 2014), but there is also another underestimated type of feedback that can help teams better collaborate. Whereas performance feedback (e.g., "our department improved profitability by 9 percent this quarter") indicates whether a task was successfully performed, process feedback indicates how the task should be (or was) performed and how the team behaves. Messages such as "your team bore upon each other's areas of expertise to solve the problem", "you provided a clear, compelling, purpose-orientated direction to the team during this meeting", or "you built a positive atmosphere by listening to each other when different viewpoints were being expressed and thanking members for offering their point of view" consist of process feedback. Process feedback can describe the team processes or specific team members' behaviors. In order for a team to function effectively, it is essential for its members to improve their team skills and communication.

These team skills necessitate different feedback interventions conveying, for example, information about how teams/team members:
(a) communicate and interact (e.g., do they deliver clear messages, ask effective questions, listen actively to others?),
(b) deal with conflicts (e.g., do they disagree constructively, use collaborative conflict styles?),
(c) define their team vision, objectives and strategies,
(d) monitor their performance,
(e) come to a common understanding of their task and its requirements,
(f) build upon each other's expertise,
(g) make team decisions, and
(h) coordinate their actions.

Process feedback helps team members identify specific areas for improvement and ways to improve. If, for example, teams are only provided performance feedback, they may not have realized that that their communication was problematic or that they displayed irrelevant task strategies, thus they would lack information about what and how to improve.

Do not only provide feedback at the end of a project or a training

To optimize feedback effectiveness, it is important to observe and monitor teams on a regular basis. Regular feedback will facilitate and reinforce positive team attitudes (such as balanced contribution) and in turn, performance. Moreover, feedback gives a prescriptive reference against which teams can evaluate their own behaviors. It helps team members understand what is meant by effective (team) work in their specific unit and provide them with an opportunity to learn. A team itself can also evaluate its progress and team members can be additional sources of feedback. For example, asking members to evaluate each other's attitudes in the team using validated peer feedback instruments (Ohland et al., 2012; O'Neill et al., 2018) can make them better aware of effective and less desirable team behaviors and inform you on how the team is doing when constant observation is not possible.

Consider feedback as a conversation and not a one-way practice

Even when the importance of two-way interactions is acknowledged, feedback often remains a one-way process from the supervisor to the employee. If you just got assigned the leadership of a team, it is important to progressively install a feedback culture by, for example, explicitly recognizing the value of feedback, modeling the use of constructive feedback, acknowledging an open-door culture, and implementing regular feedback moments in the team daily life. Also, periodically asking team members for their feedback ("How did I do?" "What am I doing that helps and what can I do better?") would communicate the message that you are open to their input to improve your feedback practices.

Provide time for reflection on feedback and guide these debriefings

In my prior work, I have demonstrated that forwarding performance feedback to teams is not sufficient to improve performance since feedback is purely evaluative by nature (Gabelica, et al., 2014). The reflective process that follows this feedback is the most important part of the procedure if you seek to improve a team ability to draw lessons from prior experiences and eventually help a team change its behavior. In the reflection procedure that follows feedback delivery, team members need to take an active part in the analysis of their performance data and in the generation of reasons why things went right or wrong (Peñarroja, Orengo, & Zornoza, 2017; Phielix, Prins, & Kirschner, 2010).

However, a potential challenging issue is motivational. For most individuals and teams, reflection is possibly the least preferred activity. Therefore, teams need

support to help them systematically analyze the decisions that produced their performance outcomes. Research has shown that teams gain even more when occasions are provided for "guided reflexivity" (e.g., Konradt, Schippers, Garbers, & Steenfatt, 2015). The latter provides teams with a guided opportunity to learn from past experiences, and to discuss consequences for future actions. In a study, we showed that teams that exhibit the capacity to reflect on their experience outperformed teams with performance feedback or no feedback (Gabelica, et al., 2014). However, we also found that teams that engaged in activities for reflexivity also encountered higher likelihood of conflict. This implies that teams should be trained to deal with reflexivity (looking forward) without getting engaged in situational or personal conflict. This requires preparing teams on how to use the results of reflective activities for their own benefits, without getting immersed in conflict situations.

One day, a project leader in a tech research and development department told me "the best learning moments in my team happen after low performance. Instead of rushing to catch up, I sit with my team and ask them "ok, we were not able to meet the deadline… but what did we do to reach this situation and importantly, how can we still make it happen?" This is a good example of "guided reflexivity" on negative performance feedback. What is important about this example is how this project leader focused the team attention on how to create the results they wanted to

accomplish instead of spending energy on blaming members. The following questions are likely to instigate reflection in order to prevent negative performance: "How well is our team performing? Where are we progressing vs. struggling? Are our adjustments effective? Where should we pay additional attention? Given the situation, what changes should we make or be prepared to make if needed?"

Provide both "positive" and "negative" feedback
In my latest work, I have found that teams that are consistently performing better than the other teams do get in an upward spiral of positive beliefs and emotions about themselves. They feel more cohesive, they experience less interpersonal conflict, and they believe they have the best experts in their team. And, the other way around: when teams perform consistently below their peer teams, they report more intrateam conflict, low cohesion and peers' credibility. However, when teams receive feedback that is not consistent over time (feedback informing that they outperformed on one task and underperformed on another one), they start to learn. These mixed signals seem to make them stop and reflect. They report more knowledge sharing, constructive discussions, and reflection on what happened and why. I do not conclude that we need to give teams more 'mixed' feedback to avoid overconfidence or conversely conflict escalation. Instead, you need to ensure that high-performing teams keep on learning and provide challenges to those who might rest on their laurels and/or miss

learning and development opportunities. Performance is dynamic. Teams need to keep on analyzing how they do, why they performed well or not up to expectations and what they can do to improve, repair, or stay high performing (Konradt, Otte, Schippers, & Steenfatt, 2016).

Practice feedback delivery

Teams need to be supported in their teamwork skills, but leaders also need to be supported in developing strategy-focused approaches. For example, they should learn to anticipate the emotional responses to feedback they give, offer appropriate facilitated support, and stimulate the search for practical solutions. They need to be trained and resourced to provide the high-quality facilitative support needed to increase the positive effects of their feedback. The creation of a feedback culture also takes time since feedback needs to get embedded implicitly and explicitly in all activities in which team members can get valuable feedback and in turn ask for feedback and give feedback to each other openly. Early training and repeated experience with feedback delivery and reflection facilitation may improve the feedback culture and overall performance over time. Feedback opportunities must be actively sought and encouraged, and data should be constantly collected to discuss plans for learning and development at the team level.

Conclusion: designing team feedback that works

To conclude, while people assume they "know" how to provide feedback, the challenge of turning knowledge into action is a key issue in organizations. Consequently, the art of giving and receiving feedback must be learned and necessitates training, coaching, and practice.

To start designing team feedback interventions that work, I suggest three steps. First, establish clear, agreed-upon team norms for behavior. Team norms are a set of rules that shape team members' interactions. Second, practice observing behaviors that help/hinder team success. Record actions performed by the team or team members and distinguish between observed behaviors and interpretations (e.g., "Tom did not share his opinion during the discussion about team norms" versus "Tom is shy and/or does not seem to care about his team"). Third, prepare your first feedback conversation with your team. Specifically, (a) relate the feedback content to team norms and team or organizational outcomes you want to see. (b) Anticipate possible difficulties in discussing behaviors you observed, possible team members' reactions, and ways to overcome those. (c) Think about what you know and do not know about the current team situation. (d) Plan how you will frame the feedback broadly and questions you will ask. (e) Finally, ask team members to provide feedback about your feedback and what you can do to better support them and reflect on how the process went.

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