Learning Faster with Effective Feedback

Running a business requires learning a surprising breadth of tools and skills, both technical and social. If we need to learn efficiently, then we want to learn from others' perspectives, as well as from our own experiences. That means we want to become skillful at giving and getting feedback. I'm going to describe several frameworks that can help us obtain and offer useful, specific information about what is working well and what we might consider doing differently.

First, it's useful to know efficient learning includes more than one kind of feedback. The term feedback simply refers to a signal regarding the results produced by an action or system. Usually, when we think of giving or getting feedback, we think of criticizing. Critical feedback, the message, "do less of that," is one kind of feedback. Hearing that feedback leads me to do less of the action that elicited it. That's balancing feedback.

The other kind, reinforcing feedback, conveys, "Do more of that," in turn, prompting an increase in the action that preceded it. When you tell a child, "What a good effort you made," you are providing reinforcing feedback. Really, you're saying, "Keep making good efforts." When I ask my spouse not to speak before I've had a cup of coffee, I'm providing balancing feedback. Do less talking under these conditions.

To make sure we hear both balancing and reinforcing feedback, I like the lightly structured tool called Benefits and Concerns. We always start with benefits. We deliberately ask, "What was good about this effort, or this draft, or this meeting? What was fun? What was useful?" And we record each benefit as a separate note or bullet. It's always good to remind ourselves of what's working well, and writing the benefits helps us remember not to eliminate something that is working when we begin to revise.

Then we ask, "What concerns do we have about this effort, or this draft, or this meeting?" When recording concerns, I find it useful to stick to two structures. One is, "I wish I knew." And the other is, "How to?"

Consider the concern about my spouse talking to me before I've had coffee. Rather than say, "Stop talking," which may not create the response I hope, I can say, "I wish I knew if you want me to retain what you're saying now," or, "How to get a cup of coffee in my hand so I can focus on what you're saying?" Though the example is trivial, I hope you can see how voicing concerns with "I wish I knew" or "How to?" can take the edge off.

More importantly, "I wish I knew" indicates we're missing information. "How to?" indicates we're missing a method or an approach. Focusing on the what and the how keeps us productive in the face of an unsatisfactory action or outcome. Starting with benefits before concerns helps us keep doing all the things that are working well.

Another framework that can be useful in giving and getting feedback is the Ladder of Inference, first articulated by Harvard professor Chris Argyris. The Ladder of Inference helps us provide better benefits and concerns. The ladder is simply a metaphor that describes how we infer meaning and craft judgments from what we observe or hear.

We are meaning-making machines. We do it so quickly, we don't even recognize we're doing it. We may see a car swerve into our lane and believe that we are seeing a jerk. But "jerk" is actually a judgment we made up really quickly. It's possible the driver is, indeed, a jerk. But it's also possible that the jerkiness is within ourselves.

Let me explain. The observable data is what a video camera would record. So in this example, the observable data was a car moving into the lane our car was occupying. If that movement was not what we expected, then we have put the data into a context of expectations-- our expectations, which are not observable.

So, with that context of expectations, we may name the data "swerve." That way of naming communicates a lot about what's in our heads and maybe not so much about the actual action or the intention behind it. We may have had bad experiences in the past in which people who were careless changed lanes without looking, endangering us and others. And we may believe that careless people are not people we like, so we assess this driver we see now as a jerk.

The ladder helps us slow our thinking. Was there something to observe that we missed? Was there a deer entering the road, a rock, a piece of debris? Is the driver experiencing a medical crisis? While we still may name the sudden lane change a swerve if it really surprised us, we may not judge the driver so harshly if we consider other interpretations of, or reasons for, swerving.

When we're giving and getting feedback, we often hear the high on the ladder conclusions, "That's great," or, "This just doesn't say anything." In these situations, the ladder helps us

navigate down the rungs of interpretation to observable data. We can ask, "What do you see that leads you to say that? Help me understand what you were expecting here and why. Please help me follow how you came to that assessment." By walking a conversation down the ladder of inference, we can often uncover previously neglected data, new interpretations, and alternative conclusions and actions.

So much of giving and getting feedback constructively centers on making explicit the assumptions that govern how we experience an event. A tool that came from Edward Deming's work in improving the quality of manufacturing processes is the Five Whys. The Five Whys help us navigate from the abstract to the concrete, climbing down and back up our ladders of inference. It simply consists of asking, "Why?" multiple times to explore how an outcome came to be. It sounds simplistic, but it can get into pretty interesting territory pretty fast.

Suppose I'm tired of feeling rushed in the morning. Why do I feel rushed? There always seems to be too many things to do before I can get out the door. Well, why is that? What is too many? More than I counted on. More than I allowed time for. Well, why is that? What prevents me from anticipating my routine? Hmm, why am I not anticipating that I need to pack my computer, make my lunch, clear the car of snow? Well, what prevents me from planning my morning more effectively? Do I not set the alarm early enough? Do I dally after I get up?

With the Five Whys, the goal is to move quickly toward identifying actions we can actually influence. Each of these tools-- Benefits and Concerns, the Ladder of Inference, and the Five Whys-- can be used reflectively, as I just demonstrated with the five whys and my rushed mornings. And they can also be used easily in conversations.

Giving and getting feedback is all about seeing more by inviting others to share what they can see. Hearing others' perspectives doesn't remove our own responsibility for deciding what to do with the feedback. It simply expands our options by complementing our own cognitive and emotional processes with others.

When we run our own business, we simply don't have the time or the funds to learn everything we need to know the hard way, which is by experiencing the disappointments of ideas that don't work as we had imagined. Instead, we can gather feedback and trust-building conversations with others.