

## **Value seen in appraisals that are forward looking**

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*"Forgiveness does not change the past, but it  
does enlarge the future."*

Paul Boese, Dutch physician & botanist (1668-1738)



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### **Feedforward**

Since employee appraisals became an unavoidable part of the annual corporate cycle, conventional wisdom holds that managers must be able to deliver feedback in a way that gets the best out of staff and motivates them to improve.

The ability to give positive and 'constructive' comments on performance highlighting the good and the less than satisfactory aspects, is now an essential leadership skill for the aspiring executive.

In this context, the standard belief is that feedback is supposed to be forthright, timely and accurate. To be effective, it should also focus on work-related skills and behaviour, rather than specific personality traits or occasional idiosyncrasies.

Of course, that is all very well, but once you have bought into the whole concept of giving feedback, it automatically leads to certain modes of thinking and various consequences, which are not necessarily desirable.

Firstly, feedback focuses on what has happened – events or actions in the past which cannot be changed.

Secondly, when asked for their views about the experience of receiving feedback, most people reported feeling negative sentiments and a certain amount of resistance.

That is to be expected because most individuals, whether giving or receiving feedback, naturally feel awkward when put in this situation.

It is also the case that employees and managers at every level are likely to take any comments personally. That happens even when special efforts are made to

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focus on performance-related factors, simply because people identify with their work and, therefore, can be super-sensitive to any hint of criticism.

To avoid these problems, Marshall Goldsmith, a top executive coach and author of many articles and books, suggests using a process he calls “feedforward”, rather than feedback.

Applying his methods, the recommended first step is to define the changes required. The essential thing is for the person being appraised to determine two areas for improvement. Ideally, these should relate to two specific types of behaviour which, if changed, would create a long-lasting positive impact.

An example might be deciding to improve one’s personal efficiency at work, thereby reducing the sense of worry or frustration that comes from failing to get things done in good time.

The next step is for the manager involved to offer practical suggestions on how to accomplish the necessary changes to reach these objectives.

This is the key part of the feedforward process and, during this phase, it is vital that the “receiver” does not jump to conclusions or rush to judgment about the ideas put forward.

The final step may seem simple, but it is also very important. It is for the person receiving ideas or suggestions to express gratitude, and for their counterpart to acknowledge this.

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I recently came across a good example of feedforward in action. It concerned a division manager working for a multinational bank who decided to make use of the principles during a team-building day.

His approach was to organize a 20-minute session with department heads. Each of them was asked to come up with two areas for improvement that could have a noticeable positive impact on their individual performance.

When they had done that, they paired off for a series of two-minute one-to-one sessions, in which each person gave and received feedforward on the relevant topics.

After that, the pairs were changed and the process repeated, making it possible to get extra ideas and another set of perspectives.

The exercise was remarkably successful and the results were almost immediately obvious. There was a high-energy buzz in the room, the participants were fully engaged and, subsequently, they described the session as insightful, inspiring and fun. You rarely hear words like that after a standard feedback session.

In analyzing why feedforward generates better input and is more effective, a key factor is that people generally adopt a non-judgmental mindset. They are thinking about the problem, not the person, and drawing back on the breadth of their own experience to come up with a solution that will work.

That means people giving feedforward do not automatically assume their ideas are right, or must be accepted. At the same time, the receiver realizes there are options and alternative route worth considering.

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A clear benefit of the method is that it encourages a positive outlook. It obliges people to look ahead, not back and shows them that all kinds of opportunities for improvement exist. This automatically creates a greater sense of energy and purpose, concentrating thoughts on the future, rather than the past.

Another major advantage is that, while a superior generally delivers feedback, anyone can provide feedforward.

Depending on the circumstances, it can be a colleague, subordinate, or a friend. The only requirement is that they have some basic knowledge of the problem or subject matter, giving them a degree of insight.

Realistically, we should not expect companies to restructure their performance appraisal processes and abandon the idea of providing individual feedback.

However, they should be taking steps to incorporate the concept of feedforward in day-to-day interactions. If it becomes an accepted practice, there is almost certain to be a better flow of ideas, closer co-operation among team members, more openness to ideas, and a greater willingness to learn and adapt.

As an example, when working with senior executives, coaches often notice that it seems to be difficult for them to let go of past events.

But one of the key coaching frameworks is to focus on opportunities rather than on problems.

Doing this tends to lift the spirits of the people being coached, whereas a focus on problems has a tendency to drag them down.

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Remember, too, that good communication is, in effect, the glue that holds an organization together. Giving employees the chance to share their experiences and contribute ideas also makes them more open to taking guidance and accepting the suggestions of others.

In this way, feedforward can make the workplace more productive, and time spent at work ultimately more enjoyable for everyone.

Using it on a larger scale will lead to a much more dynamic, innovative and open organization.



Charlie Lang is an Executive Coach and Trainer who founded Progress-U Limited in 2002. His mission is to assist his clients in becoming excellent leaders for the benefit of all stakeholders. He is a passionate and professional Executive Coach, Mentor Coach, Trainer, Public Speaker and Author of over 100 articles related to leadership, change management and innovative sales.

End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" ( see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm> ) which got published in August 2005. Charlie's articles got printed in publications like Human Resources, FZ Magazine, Banking Today, SCMP, Effective Executive, A Plus and CareerTimes.

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