
ACCEPTING FEEDBACK—ALTERING BEHAVIOR: The Achilles Heel of Human Development

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The business of behavior change is flourishing. There are a multitude of interventions available which profess to help individuals alter detrimental behaviors. Those addressing behaviors that are dysfunctional in an organizational setting range from classroom training to wilderness experiences to questionnaire-based assessment to complete, psychologically-based analysis. Yet in each of these methods there exists an Achilles heel: in order to change, an individual must be willing to truly accept feedback and recognize what behaviors need to be changed, and then put forth the effort required to make the change. Most individuals are inclined to pay lip service to the former while, at best, undertaking half-baked attempts at the latter. This article addresses some of the subtle yet critical considerations that make these dual endeavors so challenging.

An important but often undervalued component of effective feedback is the ability and sensitivity of the deliverer. The proper balance between directness and empathy is difficult to achieve, since it may need to vary considerably from individual to individual. A lack of firmness and emotional intensity may cause the recipient of feedback either to totally miss the impact of the message or to minimize its importance. Conversely, an absence of empathy may cause the recipient to reject observations which are seen as lacking understanding or an appreciation for his or her best interests.

An interesting phenomenon, seen in many people, is their tendency to focus on the negative aspects of the message when receiving feedback. This is partially due to the early programming inherent in our educational systems, in which students learn to focus on the items they answered incorrectly on an exam. Research has shown that, when an exam is returned, students seldom review the correct answers to reinforce the knowledge gained; instead, they address only incorrect responses in an attempt to rectify shortcomings. When applied later in life to an assessment of one's behavioral strengths and weaknesses, the natural inclination is to place an inordinate amount of effort on addressing liabilities. In fact, a much more beneficial approach would be a balanced one that includes reinforcing and further developing an asset along with addressing a liability. The graveyard of failed careers is filled with the skeletons of professionals who were incapable of adequately assessing their behavioral strengths and aligning them appropriately with the job opportunities that exist in a changing marketplace.

Throughout one's career it is often difficult to accurately evaluate the level of aptitude or proficiency one possesses. Egos also may be a deterrent to learning the truth. The insightful British author, Somerset Maugham, captures the essence of this dilemma in his novel, *Of Human Bondage*. It tells the story of a young man's

attempts to learn what is meaningful in life and what career he is best suited for. In his twenties he pursues a desire to become an artist, but after two years is uncertain of his abilities. Driven by deep anxiety and a boldness of spirit, he approaches the master artist who is his teacher and asks for an honest assessment of his capabilities. After a thorough review of his work, the master says, "You have a certain manual dexterity. With hard work and perseverance there is no reason why you should not become a careful, not incompetent painter. You would find hundreds who painted worse than you, hundreds who painted as well. I see no talent in anything you have shown me. I see industry and intelligence. You will never be anything but mediocre."

What is evident in this scenario, yet so seldom present when most individuals receive feedback, is an honesty, openness and directness that is wonderfully unique. First, the artist has the courage to seek and accept a critique of his efforts. Then, the teacher displays a frankness combining truthfulness and constructive criticism with a tinge of empathy. This empathy is seen again in his next comment: "If you were to ask my advice, I should say: take your courage in both hands to try your luck at something else....I would give all I have in the world if someone had given me that advice when I was your age...It is cruel to discover one's mediocrity only when it is too late."

It is interesting to contemplate a world in which individuals possessed both the capacity to accept constructive feedback (as the young aspiring artist did) and the ability to deliver such feedback in a fashion that is truly beneficial to the recipient (as the teacher did). Unfortunately, it is far more common to find individuals using a variety of sophisticated and devious ploys to protect themselves from confronting reality. The most obvious of these is outright denial. More sinister approaches, which deflect the issues and create an environment of frustration and impotence, include employing diversionary tactics that attempt to place the problem

somewhere else; minimizing the problem's importance to make it seem irrelevant or at most incidental; and, finally, attacking the source or basis for the feedback, but in a highly technical manner that appears to justify the attack.

In order to successfully engage in a feedback process, individuals must view the experience as a developmental opportunity designed to enhance their performance, and be open to what they might learn about themselves. Although this mindset is not guaranteed to remove all defensiveness, it is a constructive starting point.

In the feedback process, the problems do not usually lie in receiving positive feedback. Most of us are only too willing to hear about and pay attention to the things we are doing well. It is interesting to note, however, how uncomfortable it is for some people to accept feedback that is more positive than their own perception of themselves. They may have some deep-seated feelings suggesting that they are never totally worthy of what they perceive to be excessive praise.

Negative feedback, however, is far more difficult to receive. And, typically, there seem to be three legitimate ways in which people deal with such feedback. It is important to point out, however, that the common thread in all three approaches is **recognition and acceptance** of the validity of the feedback.

The first approach is to recognize and accept the feedback, but to consciously choose not to do anything about it. Some people know full well the impact of their behavior on others, but continue to employ these traits in order to achieve specific results. An example that comes to mind is the tough-minded manager who is charged with downsizing personnel and turning around a failing department. When this person receives feedback that he or she is unsympathetic and hard on people, it may indeed be a legitimate response to reply that such behavior is appropriate, given the situation.

The second approach is to recognize the behavior and the negative results it is producing, and to compensate by ensuring that other staff members possess offsetting and complementary attributes. An example of this approach might be the innovative but disorganized boss who hires a very structured, detail-oriented administrative assistant. Many individuals successfully employ this technique after concluding that altering very deep-seated behavior would require more time and energy than the results would be worth. They may also be concerned that reorienting their focus may have the unintended and undesired effect of weakening other attributes which are positive and valued.

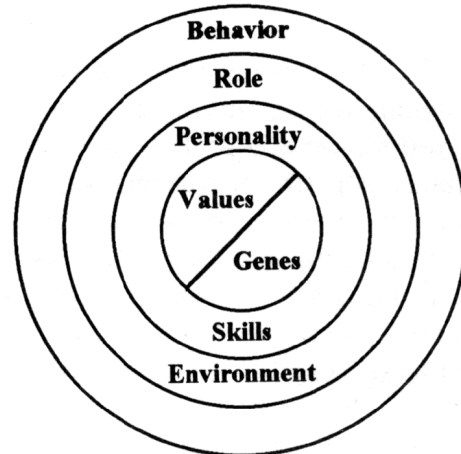
The third manner of addressing negative feedback is to recognize and accept it, and then to make a concerted effort to change. In order to undertake any sincere change effort, it is important to recognize that change does not happen quickly or easily. It is also helpful to thoroughly and accurately assess what one is capable of changing. Each of us has certain traits which are so deeply imbedded in our make-up that changing them to a meaningful degree is so difficult as to be nearly impossible.

Figure 1 depicts the key elements that cause each of us to be what we are and behave as we do. An analysis of the model will help in understanding what is and is not amenable to change, as well as the extent of the effort that is required to bring change about. As one moves from the center outward toward the periphery, the opportunity for change increases.

At the center, the core of our being, exist genes and values. Genes represent the unchangeable, physical heritage we are born with. It is easy to see how a person who is born with the genetic ability of an athlete like Tiger Woods would evolve quite differently from a person who is born with serious physical challenges. Even with regard to basic attributes such as these, however, some people may have

difficulty assessing what they are or are not capable of doing.

Figure 1.



Values are the other core component of the model. Our deeply held values are formed by the various strong messages which were communicated to each of us, verbally and non-verbally, thousands of times during the first ten to fifteen years of our lives. These messages come from parents, relatives, teachers, coaches, religious leaders - literally any of the prominent adult figures in our world during that period. When these messages are strong and consistent, they become the constants by which we define right and wrong. Consider, for example, the very different sets of values represented by strong messages such as: "money is the measure of a man's worth," versus "money isn't everything," or "do unto others as you would have others do unto you," versus "always look out for #1."

In early childhood, we are not yet capable of questioning the validity of these messages and, therefore, we accept them as truth. Interestingly, significant research suggests that, as adults, most people do not question whether these imbedded values still work for them, and thus they continue to adhere to them blindly. Particularly deep-seated values often act as the foundation for behavior that can take on a rigid cast. In an organizational setting, this rigid,

value-based behavior can sometimes cause problems which may be detrimental to one's effectiveness. A specific example of the connection between values and behavior will be provided shortly.

The second ring in the model includes the components of personality, aptitude and skills. Built on the foundation of genes and values, personality, aptitude and skills are developed over time. Obviously, Tiger Woods' athletic skills are genetically based, but they are also value-based. If he had been raised in an environment that discouraged athletic accomplishments, today's fans might never have had the pleasure of watching his golfing career. Similarly, aspects of personality like his great smile are genetic, while his warmth and humanness are value-related. While altering these elements may require significant effort, the possibility for change is still greater than it is for genes and values.

The third ring in the model is the component of role. Although not an inherent aspect of one's make-up, role is an intervening variable which may either encourage or discourage the development of the other characteristics of one's being. Organizations or roles which do not recognize an individual's major assets and do not create a developmental environment prevent that person from making the most of the elements that make him or her special and unique. However, it is difficult for most people to accept the fact that it is their responsibility to find the best alignment of their unique talents within a role or an organization. Some organizations may provide assistance and opportunities; nevertheless, the ultimate accountability rests with the individual.

The fourth and outer ring of the model represents behavior. This is the level at which we interact with the outside world, and where the greatest potential for change exists. However, it is important to remember that even at this level, although change may be easier, change is not easy. If an individual employs a

specific behavior in a very pronounced and/or consistent fashion, there is an excellent possibility that it is anchored to a strong value.

For example, a highly empathetic person may rely on empathetic behavior in many circumstances, believing it to be a major asset. Yet when any behavior is used indiscriminately, it is often the case that the person may be blind to the potentially adverse consequences associated with the behavior. In the case of empathy, the adverse consequences might be a lack of objectivity, an avoidance of conflict, and an inordinate need to be liked. In an organizational or leadership role these attributes could prove to be major liabilities. An inability to recognize these negative consequences of strongly empathetic behavior may be due to a strong connection between the behavior and early value-programming experiences. Individuals who are very highly empathetic might well have been raised in environments where the strong and constantly repeated messages were, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or "if you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all." These messages become values so deeply ingrained that the subconscious belief is that those who do not conform to these values are simply not worthy or decent people. This blind adherence makes it difficult to see the potential liabilities of the behavior, and even more difficult to change the behavior.

Individuals willing to attempt behavior change need to keep in mind two significant points when receiving feedback about their behavior. First, one must take into consideration "the eye of the beholder." It is vital to consider the source of the feedback and the influences affecting the person providing the observations. Examining feedback in this kind of external, objective manner may make it easier to consider and process. Second, one must view the feedback within the context of the role one is playing. For most people, today's complex organizational climates require interacting with

multiple stakeholders who have differing needs and, therefore, differing perceptions.

The importance of both of these points can be seen in the example of a Vice President of Development in a large midwestern medical center. As part of a development process, he received feedback on his leadership practices from multiple raters - his own perceptions, as well as those of his peers, his boss, and the board of directors. On a number of the interpersonal behaviors measured by the leadership model, his self perceptions were significantly aligned with those of his peers. Boss and board feedback were similarly aligned but greatly at variance with the self/ peer perceptions.

His self/peer profile described an individual who was articulate, interpersonally adept and appropriately gregarious, and who displayed a moderate amount of emotional intensity. The profile suggested that he made an obvious impact on others and created a pleasantly informal environment that contributed to his overall effectiveness.

In contrast, the boss/board perception was of an individual who was seen as a person of few words, one who projected minimal interpersonal skills and was extremely reserved emotionally. The profile suggested that his impact was nearly non-existent, which seriously called into question his effectiveness and, ultimately, his suitability for the position. This individual was aware that he behaved quite differently with his peers than he did with his boss and the board. In fact, he had consciously chosen to use this reserved approach with his boss and the board, believing it to be more appropriate for dealings at that level of the organization. The extreme nature of the behavioral shift was the essence of the problem.

Another aspect of the profile that helped clarify the cause of this behavior pattern was his extreme deference to people in positions of authority. Upon further investigation, it was

learned that this individual's value programming experiences included significant messages about respecting one's elders as well as "experts" - those who were given credence for knowing what they were doing. This value was so deeply embedded that it prevented him from recognizing that he was now an integral member of the authority group, and that it was truly inappropriate to continue this obvious deference.

These revelations have made it possible for him to undertake the necessary course of action to alter his behaviors. This case is also a fine example of the point that knowledge and understanding derived from sound and credible feedback can provide the basis for bringing about the behavioral shifts which translate into more effective leadership.

Still, it is important to note that change is seldom easy. Each of us is basically secure with our own status quo because it is known and comfortable. Change produces anxiety, due to the uncertainty and discomfort of undertaking activities which are unfamiliar and rife with the potential for failure. Ultimately, there exist three great motivators, one or more of which acts as the catalyst to initiate change. These motivators are fear, pain and reward.

For most people, fear and pain are usually much stronger change agents than reward. Unless one is really threatened or in deep pain, the motivation to act is not great - inertia reigns supreme. There are individuals whose desire to achieve something is so great that the reward will motivate the change; however, it seems that fear and pain initiate change far more frequently.

Another factor that makes change difficult is the amount of effort that is required to alter others' perceptions of us once they associate a certain behavior with us. We may feel that we are expending enormous energy to change our behavior, yet others fail to recognize any difference. There are two reasons for this. First,

because even slight movement outside our comfort zone creates enormous tension, our efforts to change may feel very significant to us.

Yet, in reality, what may feel significant internally is often barely perceptible externally.

Second, once we are stereotyped, human nature makes it difficult for others to see us differently.

Thus, unless the change we are undertaking is quite dramatic, we may need to make others more aware of our efforts so they can be looking for the change more consciously.

A great part of education as well as training and development is focused on the goal of getting individuals to change. Thus, understanding the obstacles that will be encountered would seem to be a relevant consideration. It is hoped that these insights will help individuals to be more realistic in their ambitions and effective in their efforts to attain their personal and professional goals and objectives.

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