- TO FEED FORWARD or to feedback? That is the Question.

A simple communication tool to develop a coaching perspective in a managerial environment

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FOR A SPANISH VERSION :

in a number of training, consulting and coaching circles, feed-forwarding is an original communication technique that has been taught and used at least since the early 1990s. In these circles and other communication and personal development environments, the art of giving feedforward is used to enhance and sometimes even to replace positive and negative feedback.

Over time, feed forward skills have gradually proven to be much more than a simple communication tool. When correctly implemented, the rather simple one-to-one and collective communication feed forward competency has proven to be a very powerful, strategic change-management tool. In short, the capacity to feed forward can quite successfully help create important and sustainable individual and collective changes in perspectives. It can usefully be implemented in problem solving, in conflict resolution, in training and consulting, in personnel evaluations, in project management, as a systematic meeting process in teams, etc. Implemented on a larger scale in organizations, feed forward can support a delegation management posture and can foster changes in organizational cultures. To be sure, feed forward skills are a very powerful and innovative communication process.

So what is a feed forward?

Very simply put: rather than providing positive or negative feedback, feed forward consists in providing future-oriented options or solutions.

Examples:

- Next time you perceive a curve in the road ahead, I suggest you slow down before the curve, and accelerate when you are in the curve. Try that, and see how it feels.
- For the next meetings, I suggest you agree to have Bob pick you up on his way here. He always manages to arrive a few minutes early.

This feed forward type of comment can advantageously replace positive or negative feedback on the way a given person has managed past behavior, such as for the examples above, poorly handling curves while driving or coming late to meetings.

In a large number of personal and professional situations, implementing a feed forward communication technique offers a number of obvious advantages.

- Feed forward is solution-oriented, providing clear indications on how to solve a problem without offering positive or negative criticism.
- Feed forward is future-oriented, avoiding comments on past behaviors or results, that indeed cannot be changed.
- Feed forward is behavioral or focused on precise actions rather than on general principles, (such as in the above example: "you drive dangerously", or "you are always late").
- Feed forward is not judgmental.
- Feed forward is empowering, very simply offering optional avenues for improvement or for autonomous development.
- Feed forward is respectful, and help reinforce positive and partnering relationships.
- Feed forward is participative, as it allows all involved persons practical means to help solve potentially repetitious negative experiences.
- Feed forward helps resolve conflicts by positioning relationships in a positive and supportive dimension.
- Feed forward paves the way to prepare for future shadow coaching, as in the above situation: "Here's a curve coming now... do you want to test how it feels to slow down before the curve and then accelerate out of the curve?

The advantages in giving feed feed forward are numerous, and they rapidly become obvious to anyone or any team that makes a commitment to practice the technique on a regular basis. There are however, a number of comments to consider concerning the development of this skill.

The contexts for feedback, positive or negative

In collective settings, reacting to other people's inappropriate behavior is useful if not necessary. In most social contexts, this need is obvious. There are, however, many different habits and traditions as to how this reaction should be expressed. Different cultural habits are so deeply engrained that conflicts often arise when they are not respected.

In some cultural settings such as in Latin environments, when one is dissatisfied with another's actions in any personal or professional relationship, negative feedback is considered to be the natural automatic response. "That move was not very successful". "Don't do that." I don't like it when you…" "Your sales have not been very good for a few weeks." Etc. In personal and social environments, such a direct approach often creates an expected positive or negative response. The choice of response will help reveal the underlying nature of the relationship, and will allow it either to evolve in a more positive dimension or to dissolve into a conflict or separation. In those cultures, negative feedback therefore helps reveal the need to make positive choices, should one wish to preserve the relationship.

In other cultural contexts such as in Anglo Saxon environments, this type of negative feedback is obviously considered not acceptable. It indicates that the relationship is already conflictual or close to rupture. In Anglo Saxon cultural contexts, negative feedback is considered much too direct or directive, uncouth or unpolished, and not at all motivating for anyone to receive. As such, when response to negative behavior has been withheld for some length of time, the tone of voice may also demonstrate impatience or anger, which will add to the relational problem. In those environments negative feedback directed at behavior is generally perceived as critical of the person, and as such, it is rightfully rejected.

Consequently in Anglo Saxon cultures, negative feedback is very rarely considered to be enlightening or developmental. It is even perceived as proof that the relationship has already evolved into a negative dimension and that separation or conflict is to be expected. When provided on a regular basis in those cultures, negative feedback has proven to provoke a stifling communication process, if not a clearly de-motivating parent-child relationship. As a consequence, giving outright negative feedback has gradually become politically incorrect in the Anglo Saxon world, and in many multicultural settings historically managed by Anglo Saxon influences.

As a consequence of these cultural differences,

- To members of a more Latin cultural context, one needs to learn how to read between the lines to understand circumvallated Anglo Saxon relational expressions that soften or sugarcoat and sometimes avoid expressing what could be clearly stated with direct negative feedback.
- To members of a more Anglo Saxon context, one needs to learn how to accept the very direct and efficient behavioral negative feedback without taking it as a personal affront and immediately feel as if defensive or offensive strategies should immediately kick in to save face.

Positive or negative feedback, which one to choose?

Of course, the question is wrongly put. The real question is why choose? Experiments with learning machines have proved beyond doubt that the good mix in giving positive and negative feedback is to respect a strict 50-50 equilibrium. Too much negative is surely de-motivating, and too much positive very often develops self-satisfied complacency.

One dimension that these studies have not measured, however, is if positive and negative feedback on past behavior may help create new unexpected behavior in the future. Indeed, while the champions of one or another cultural bias argue on the merits of one or another form of feedback, both camps buy the limiting point of view that giving feedback, positive or negative or both and maybe neither, is the only way to go.

The truth is that giving feedback is focused on making a choice on past behavior and not on learning new ones the future. That is the equivalent on commenting on what can be perceived in a rear-view mirror rather than proposing optional actions for what may be coming on the road ahead, and could be perceived through the windshield. And this is how the feed forward communication technique suddenly changes the perspective on how to communicate optional solutions for innovative behaviors in future situations.

The manager-coach feed forward perspective

To be very explicit about feed forward in coaching, most professional coaches consider that it is absolutely not advisable for coaches to offer their clients any option or solution, and at any rate, not with the intent that the given advice be accepted and implemented. So feed forward skills do not have their place in a formal coaching relationship.

On the other hand, even if it suggests advice, feed forwards are future-oriented, action-oriented, and solution oriented options. And all three of these orientations are quite fundamentally coherent with a coaching frame of reference. Indeed, the main perspective characteristic of a coaching stance is that coaches apply their art to helping clients focus more on their future ambitions than on their past problems, on their developmental aspirations than on their difficulties and shortcomings, on their on their useful future strengths rather than on their past or limiting weaknesses, on their available supports rather than on their missing means. In short, if coaches aim to help their clients focus on their future rather than on their pasts, they should be better wired to feed forward than to feed back.

It so happens that managers, trainers, consultants, leaders, recruiters, teachers, and all other professions that deal with human development do not have any qualms about giving outright advice. As a matter of fact, it could even be considered part of their job description to openly suggest preferential or more effective future behavior:

- "To develop a more powerful tennis backhand, practice turning your back to the net when you prepare your swing. That will significantly increase its span and the power you put into the ball."

That was one good piece of advice my tennis instructor gave me in my teens. I practiced it and it worked. That built my competency and my confidence, and I became a much better tennis player.

- As a young entrepreneur, I wish someone had given me the advice to be careful to never have a single client account for more than twenty percent of my business. When our one most important client decided to in-source our services, our business almost crashed, and it us took over a year to get back into the game.

Both of the above advisory examples are forward-looking options for development and success. In the case of my tennis instructor, the advice surely rested on the observation that my backhand was indeed rather weak. The instructor did not give me positive or negative feedback, however. And indeed, neither would have been of much help. In the case of my entrepreneurial mishap, a more attentive accounting firm could have seen the potential danger in our client portfolio and given us the advice before our business hit the rocks. In other words, feed forwarding advice can be given to avoid possible negative consequences, before these even appear on the radar screen.

Consequently, feed forward skills are an excellent way to give future and solution-oriented advice, or advice within a coaching perspective, when one is a leader, a manager, a trainer, or a consultant. To be sure, this is often already done by many of the above professionals. What could take these professionals even farther, however is if they almost systematically made a point to replace almost all their feedback with feed forward. Now that would offer many more thorough developmental perspective.

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Feed forwards address precise solution-oriented actions rather than general concepts.

In order to deliver effective feed forward requests or suggestions, one needs to focus on proposing very *practical behaviors*, specific actions or words rather than general ideas, principles and concepts. Consider the difference between the following proposals.

- "Next time, I suggest you participate more in our team meetings", or "In future team meetings, every time John participates in the discussion, use that as a benchmark to remind yourself that you need to participate at least as much".
- "In the next meetings, I suggest you develop more presence to the team work, and avoid consulting your phone or having side discussions with your neighbors", or "At the start of our next meetings, I suggest you establish agreements with your two immediate neighbors, that they would interrupt you whenever you initiate a side discussion or start consulting your phone messages."

Note that in these two examples, the issues are addressed on very different levels. The first level is conceptual with feed forward suggestions focused on developing participation and presence in a team meeting context. The other feed forwards are focused on suggesting very practical memo-technical reminders and precise behavioral solutions. The effects of advice on each level are very different:

- When people are addressed on a conceptual or principle level, they will react on that level, agreeing or disagreeing with the validity of the concept or principle.

Is it indeed important that I participate more? What if I have nothing to say? What is the issue with consulting phone messages if I don't disrupt others? Etc.

- When people are addressed on a behavioral level, they also react on that level, agreeing or disagreeing with the validity of one or another

solution.

Is that a good solution? Are there other solutions? What would work even better? What would be my type of solution?

When we challenge solutions, we are not in fact challenging the underlying principles or problem definitions that those solutions are there to address. In the case of our meeting issues, one may think of other ways to participate more or other ways to be more present. One will not challenge the principle level that we do in fact need to consider other behaviors.

Consequently, the more a feed forward is general, conceptual or principle-oriented, the less it will offer a clear indicator of what behavior is in fact to be experimented as a solution. The more practical and operational a feed forward, the more it is illustrated by behaviors or clearly formulated sentences, the more the situations they are aiming to solve will be considered valid and accepted, and the more behaviorsal change will in fact be implemented.

To give a practical example, the above text offers a principle that all effective feed forward is future oriented. We generally understand this principle very well. Unfortunately when starting to formulate a feed forward, many people start by making feedback comments, in order to justify whatever change they will want to suggest. And these feedback comments are often not well received. It is consequently very important to be practical as to how to formulate all future oriented requests or suggestions.

- **Examples**: it is strongly suggested that learners start their feed forward phrases by saying: "In the future…", or "Next time you prepare for a trip…", or "In the next five meetings, I suggest….", etc. Starting sentences with words that set one's mind to focus on the future will help formulate future-oriented solutions.

Developing new Communication habits

Consider the following assignment: In a personal or professional setting, first consider one person with whom you want to test a complete feed forward process, and then consider a change in behavior you would like to propose.

1) Prepare your phrasing

- For a member of the family: When you borrow my car in the future, and return it with an empty tank, can you please tell me about it the evening before so that I can plan to get it filled in the morning rather than get late to work?
- For the manager of another department: Next time there is an order from Texibio, can you send us a full copy of the file in advance so that we can really secure the invoicing process with their accounting?

To introduce these feed forward requests, it may be useful to first secure an agreement to do so: "May I formulate a request?" Should the feed forward be offering advice, then the question could then be: "Could I offer some advice".

Another useful introductory attitude consists in adopting a low or humble attitude: Tell me if I am disturbing you now, but I would like to formulate a request. Or, I know you didn't request it, and this may be out of bounds for you, but I think I could offer you some advice here.

2) Test your complete feed forward phrasing several times before applying it with your concerned partners.

3) Repeat the process on different issues, advices and requests with different people in your work environment and in your private life, at least twice per day for a full 25 days. As you become more proficient, let yourself improvise more feed forward experimentation in unexpected situations and with unexpected people.

4) At the end of this feed forward training period, measure the effects.

5) When you have modeled the new communication mode, start solliciting feed forward from others who give you feedback. "Thank you for your comment. What do you suggest I do in the future that would be more appropriate for you? "Thank you for your positive feedbacK. Can you suggest future improvements I could consider?"

In a team or other collective context, you can propose everyone get into the habit of giving and solliciting feed forwarding on a regula basis. Very rapidly such a collective agreement can do wonders to change collective behaviors and implement very creative and practical solutions in a very positive way.

Concluding observations

For many people, developing such a new communication habit can be quite a strain. Formulating future-oriented feed forward comments, requests or advice in the place of positive or negative feedback will almost feel like a mind-bender. This is the initial period, when the mind seems to be struggling to wire new synapses. The effort to install new thought processes and linguistic habits can be physically draining. Gradually, however, as these new mental routes are tested, used and developed, they will become more comfortable and start feeling like new habits.   After a few weeks, the new behaviors will start feeling natural. They will have become automatic responses, or new habits. The change process generally takes a little over 22 days. This is a very natural learning process

What may come as a surprise is that many people will respond very positively to the proposed feed forward requests, advice or options. Culturally, many of us have developed negative anticipations, or even fear, concerning possible reactions others may have to our behavior-oriented feedback. That is why we often avoid mentioning difficult issues altogether. When we change our communication process from offering feedback to offering feed forward, however, we still have remnants of this negative anticipation. It can be quite a surprise when people are thankful for new, future-oriented, positive, constructive options.

After practicing feed forward skills with others for a few weeks, you may start feeling that your own general perspectives are changing. You may notice that gradually, you look more for solutions than focus on problems, that you are more centered on future options than on past issues, that you are more centered on possible actions than on analyzing what happened that went wrong. In general, you may have shifted to looking a little more forward than looking back. In this way, you will have developed a little more of a coaching perspective in the way you live your relationships and your personal and professional life.

When a feed forward habit has been developed on a larger scale, in teams and organizations, the process gradually becomes a shared or cultural process, in the true sense of the word. It becomes a collective behavioral habit that individuals recognize a being an integral part of their collective identity. New members are easily trained into it when older system members model it, and the constructive benefits of the process become collective. This culturally engrained behavioral trait helps really implant into organizational cultures the true meaning of being solution-focused, constructive, action-oriented, future-oriented, proactive and responsible. The organizational system can then claim that it has developed a true manager-coach type of culture.

By Alain Cardon