



ZENGER | FOLKMAN

The Power of Feedback

by Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman



The Power of Feedback

“We all need people who will give us feedback. That’s how we improve.”

– Bill Gates

It has become widely accepted that feedback between managers and subordinates improves the way an organization functions. We expect to hear that from the head of Human Resources, but even a technical executive like Bill Gates understands the wisdom of feedback.

So, how do you make it happen? How do you make it more frequent and more impactful? One

employee survey encompassing many organizations concluded that only one-third of employees reported receiving useful feedback from their manager/employer in the past six months. Our research confirms that conclusion. Giving feedback, primarily the corrective or redirecting kinds, appears to be the most challenging single act that leaders face in their daily work.



Subordinates say they want more.

The good news is that when feedback happens, it is usually well-received. Employees think it helps them to improve their performance and succeed in their role. Which leads to the question, as an important part of a firm's culture, what can be done to increase feedback?

Improve supply and demand

Most organizations generally encourage managers to provide feedback to their direct reports. Some force it to happen at least once a year via the performance appraisal process. About one-fifth of larger corporations train managers on the skills of giving feedback. These steps are increasing the supply of feedback.

But what if we also worked equally energetically on the demand side of the equation. We all know from experience that it is infinitely easier to give someone information that you think will help them (which, by the way, is our definition of feedback) if that person asks you for your ideas. When an employee swings open the door by asking for feedback, the manager is far more likely to step in and offer new perspectives. By overtly asking, the employee has signaled to the

manager their receptivity. Asking for feedback removes many of the psychological barriers that prevent managers from offering feedback.

Encouraging employees to open the spigot

- 1.** We explicitly recommend sending a strong message from senior management to everyone in the organization. The message is that feedback is a two-way street. "Employees, if you want more ideas from your boss about better ways to perform your job, suggestions about things you might do in addition to what you are currently doing, or how to fine-tune the approach that you use, then ask for feedback." That one step will do more than any single thing to open the spigot of feedback.
- 2.** But wait, there is one more step. The second thing that employees can do is to become better recipients of feedback. Take full advantage of feedback conversations. If your boss provides some useful ideas, you have a choice. One is to end the conversation by simply saying "Thank you."

The good news is that when feedback happens, it is usually well-received.

Or you could fully mine this opportunity. You can ask questions like:

- Let me be sure I understand your suggestion. Can you give me some examples?
- So what was it about what I did that was so helpful?
- Do you see other opportunities for me to do more of that?
- Are there any other observations about what I'm doing, not doing, or the manner that I go about doing things that would be helpful for me to know?

This list could be lengthy, and the serious employee will dive in and get the full benefit from this conversation.

Persuading managers to ask for feedback

There is a powerful result in encouraging employees to ask for feedback. Managers should be encouraged to do exactly the same thing. Some readers may be thinking, "But managers give feedback—they don't ask for feedback." We invite you to consider the effect of managers asking for feedback.

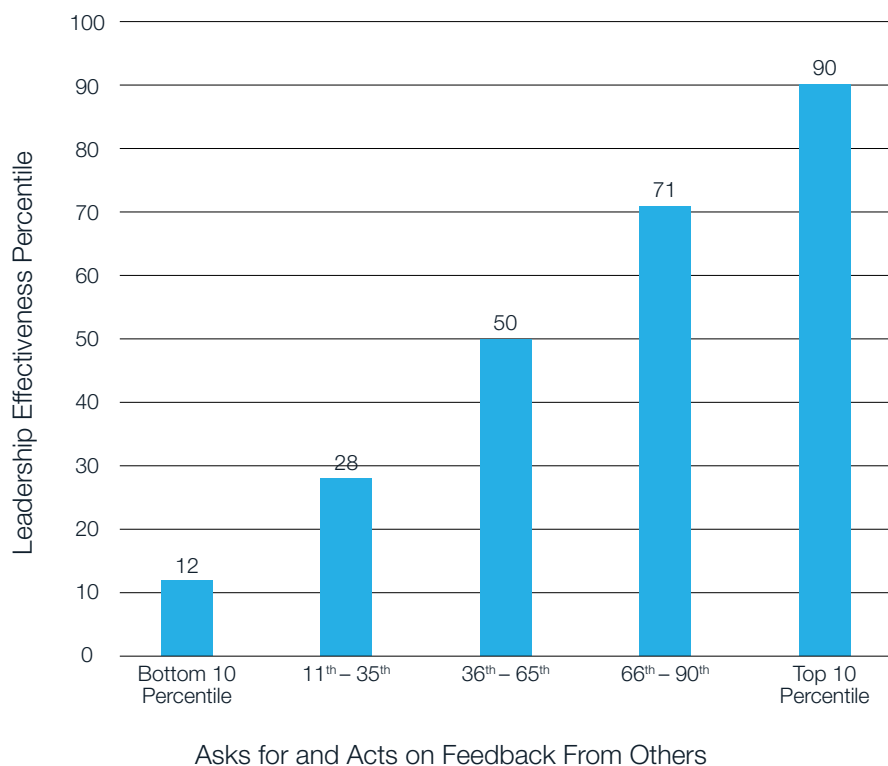
1. It elevates them in the eyes of their subordinates. A few managers fear that this might diminish the perceptions others have of them. The research argues just the opposite; it elevates the manager.
2. It enables the manager to set the example, both in the willingness to ask, but especially to set the bar about how people should respond.
3. It sends a message to others in the organization that the manager respects them

and genuinely seeks their opinions about important issues.

In a recent study of 51,896 leaders, we found that those ranked at the bottom 10% in asking for feedback were rated at the 15th percentile in overall leadership effectiveness. On the other hand, leaders who ranked at the top 10% in asking for feedback were on average, at the 86th percentile in effectiveness.

Asking for feedback has no downsides if it is done appropriately. What holds many

Those Who Ask and Act on Feedback are Significantly Better Leaders



people back is worrying that they will sound like they are fishing for a compliment, or that they may seem insecure, uncertain, and in need of reassurance. This worry is unnecessary.

There is a straightforward step that will consistently increase the amount of feedback you receive. It is very simple. Ask. Asking sends the signal that you value and want information that others possess. It makes it far easier for them to step up and offer feedback when you ask for it.

There's no "one way" to ask for feedback.

- It can be the approach that former New York City Mayor Ed Koch used as he walked about town. He would ask

people, "How am I doing?" For him, that worked.

- It can be as casual as the manager asking the team, "What did you like about our meeting today." Then after hearing a few comments, "And what would you change to make our meetings even better?"
- It can be bold, as the manager who wandered through the organization saying to people, "So tell me something you suspect I don't know and probably don't want to hear."

Eradicating blind spots

One of the critical benefits of asking for and receiving feedback is that it causes blind

spots to fade away. We all have some behaviors that we don't recognize, while everyone around us sees them quite clearly. Often those behaviors are unwittingly getting in our way of greater success.

A few years ago, Zenger Folkman studied how well individuals could predict their weaknesses and strengths. The conclusion was quite unexpected; others were twice as accurate as the individual at predicting weaknesses and strengths. The graph below demonstrates the misperceptions. The poorest leaders tended to overrate their effectiveness, while the best leaders tended to underrate themselves.

Differences between Self versus Other Ratings





360-degree Feedback

Research shows that the most effective and robust way of asking for feedback is through a 360-degree assessment process where feedback is solicited from subordinates, peers, and the boss. This approach guarantees respondents' anonymity and confidentiality, helping them feel safe in delivering honest and candid feedback. These assessments are designed to cover a wide range of leadership competencies and behaviors that provide extremely valuable information to the leader.

Conclusion

The advantage of receiving ongoing feedback is much like the advantage you gain from a GPS device as opposed to a paper map. Both provide directions about where you want to go. The GPS, however, provides the directions in the context of an accurate assessment of where you currently are. The GPS also uses

multiple satellites to determine that location. Likewise, feedback should not come from just one source, to be the most accurate.

Create an open feedback culture at your organization by leading the way. You may be nervous that people may not want to hear your feedback, and you may be apprehensive about the messages you will receive when you open yourself up by asking. Behind those closed doors is a wealth of information and insight that has the potential to elevate you and your organization.

If your team is looking to grow and develop, try initiating a 360-degree assessment process. These assessments can illuminate areas of strength and potential trouble spots while, most importantly, guiding leaders to development targets that will have the greatest impact.

A good question is one of the powerful tools a leader can utilize, and it is absolutely free. Go ahead. Ask.

Research shows that the most effective and robust way of asking for feedback is through a 360-degree assessment process where feedback is solicited from subordinates, peers, and the boss.

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.

