

The Centrality of Feedback in Teaching Business Communication and Improving Performance

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Abstract

This paper examines two ways feedback is typically used: 1) to improve one's self and 2) for a manager, coach, or instructor to try to help someone else improve. The author presents a Timely Feedback Model suggesting self-correcting feedback is the central concept in teaching communication and in performance improvement strategies. The paper examines how the word feedback is used, identifies some of the theorists/researchers who have influenced this author's assumptions, and offers examples of how the model has been and can be used successfully by teachers, business leaders, and coaches.

Introduction

Is it possible, after all that has been written over the past 80 plus years about communication in general and feedback in particular, that there just might be a new way of looking at feedback? Is it possible that a better understanding of how feedback works could lead to improving business communication and employees' performance?

Thousands of colleges and universities around the world and perhaps twice as many consultants and consulting houses have physical and electronic education and training programs designed to enable business people and business leaders to communicate more effectively. This paper (a) examines some of the popular ways "feedback" is conceptualized and used to improve performance; (b) visits some of the more scientific/academic applications of the concept; and then (c) presents a specific case example of how the Timely Feedback Model has been successfully used both to improve the actual process of enabling performance improving feedback, as well as to motivate managers, leaders and teachers, who typically delay offering feedback, to play an active and critical role in making timely feedback useful to others. Ultimately, feedback is central to teaching business communication and in giving people the tools they need to take responsibility for improving their own performance.

The word feedback is used today to describe a wide range of experiences in which someone wants to support or change someone else's behavior, beliefs, or emotions. When the word "feedback" first appeared in the English language in 1920 (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and Thesaurus, Deluxe Audio Edition, 2000), it was used in the context of self-correcting/controlling electronic circuits and mechanical systems: "The return to the input of a part of the output of a machine, system, or process (as for producing changes in an electronic circuit that improve performance or in an automatic control device that provide self-corrective action)" (Merriam-Webster, 2000).

Use of the Word Feedback in a Variety of Contexts

Today, teachers design tests to give feedback to students. Supervisors conduct performance evaluations for their employees. Many leaders participate in 360-degree feedback evaluations during which a variety of people share their opinions and observations. Almost countless arrays of self-assessments are available to give people feedback about themselves, usually in the context of understanding and improving behavior and relationships in an organization. Many executive coaches are retained to work with leaders around the globe in the hopes they will be able to provide some useful feedback to their protégés. Within many organizations there exist Human Resources Development or Staff Development departments that employ training specialists who have learned how to teach job skills as efficiently and effectively as possible. These organizational trainers in business and industry often have exceptional skills giving their employees/students feedback about their learning. Many utilize behavioral checklists, peer observations, written tests, simulations, and video feedback. All of these efforts by teachers, supervisors, coaches and trainers are well intentioned and nearly all, with the exception of sophisticated simulation training and advanced uses of video feedback, are excellent examples of sub-optimum applications of feedback because they are typically not designed to help individual performers learn how to discern useful feedback from their actual work. Teaching people how to discern feedback in their work environment is comparable to installing a continuous process improvement generator in the student or employee. This is an additional instruction, which cannot be assumed to be taking place in the typical classroom or on-line training environment.

There are several reasons for suggesting the above examples of training make sub-optimum use of the way feedback works. Written tests, be they multiple choice, fill-in-the blank, or true/false are designed to measure recall, not the ability to make real time decisions in an actual work environment. Psychomotor tests are designed to test a person's abilities against a specific standard or against a range of anticipated problems. They are not usually designed to teach someone how to incorporate ongoing feedback into their work so that they can continuously improve their performance—they also teach to a standard.

Performance evaluations are another example of a sub-optimum application of feedback. Annual performance reviews are often contrived encounters during which a supervisor who has a level of authority and omniscience passes judgment on a subordinate, too often without adequate opportunities for clarification, understanding, or rebuttal. While most people in business frequently call these meetings opportunities for subordinates to get feedback from their supervisors, most reasonable people understand if the "feedback" were really important, it would not have been withheld until the performance review. Hence, the performance review, ideally, is a review of feedback actually made available on the job and an assessment of how, or if, the feedback was used to maintain or improve quality performance. A supervisor's introduction of previously unidentified performance weaknesses or problems during the annual review meeting is usually met with a less than appreciative response.

Simulation training (airlines, medical schools, nursing schools, trade schools, etc.) is perhaps the most expensive kind of training and it offers the greatest opportunity to use feedback appropriately—for the student to learn how to discern self-correcting feedback in the work environment. Simulations are typically designed to produce realistic consequences (or the appearance of realistic consequences) that flow from the performers' decisions and actions. In simulation training, as for example when training firefighters by using real smoke and real fire, the

learner gets immediate feedback if the Scott Air Pack is not fitted properly. The firefighter knows the simulation is contrived, but it is also real. Learners work in as safe an environment as possible and as hazardous an environment as necessary to learn not just a skill, but also the implications of their decisions.

Using videotapes of how one actually performs in the real work environment has been part of athletic training for many years. Swimmers study their strokes, football players study their individual and team performance, gymnasts examine their routines looking for the subtlest of opportunities to improve their performance the next time they go on the mat. Video feedback has also made substantial headway into organizational training. Too often though, the videotape feedback sessions also fail to capture the full potential of feedback. When training people in sales, customer service, or interviewing, students typically give one or two presentations or role-plays that are videotaped. Then an “expert” plays back the tape asking videotaped students what could have been done better. Some times other classmates are asked to participate in this critique. In such situations, videotaped students are usually hypercritical of their own performance and the instructor picks, from a mental list of dozens of opportunities, a few suggestions that the learner might be able to master with practice. Students often leave feeling intimidated with memories of their “poor” performance burned into their minds. Sometimes what they learn is to never participate in videotaped training programs again. The best users of videotaped feedback make certain the students have opportunities to demonstrate the learning correctly so that they can leave with the visual memory of success rather than failure and sometimes even the recorded tape of their improved performance. Even with this technology, if the teacher is providing the feedback, as opposed to the student learning how to discern the available feedback, something important is lost. Teachers, at heart, want to teach independence, not dependence. As such, learners need to be taught how to discern feedback, not how to wait and listen for others to point it out.

Use of all these educational technologies is sub-optimum when the learner consistently depends upon the teacher for more and more suggestions or feedback. In contrast, a more successful application of these learning technologies would result in accelerating learners’ abilities to perform their work correctly in the actual work environment by responding to cues (timely feedback) inherent in the work and displayed by coworkers and customers.

Timely Feedback is Self-Correcting

Feedback is central to teaching communication and enabling performance improvement via self-correction, as opposed to other-correction. Most people are fully capable of using self-correcting information (feedback) throughout their work and home lives. In many cases, the opportunity for self-correcting feedback is delayed or denied altogether. Interestingly, teaching people how to use feedback is a relatively easy process, in part because everyone does it all the time. Acquiring this skill in the work environment does not require attendance at conferences or 3-hour training modules. Rather, it can be woven into the fabric of most training programs in less than 15 to 20 minutes. The key question is this: “What feedback in the students’ work environment will enable them to get immediate feedback when their performance meets or exceeds expectations?” The answers to this question need to be added to most training programs. The rationale for this approach is a little more complicated than the fact that it works. Using feedback is a natural process that can be easily optimized to improve communication and performance.

A pure example of the role of feedback would be the way a parent teaches a young child how to ride a bicycle. Since it is generally accepted that a child must be of a certain developmental level before being able to learn, let's assume the child has reached this level. In one scenario, it is a beautiful Saturday morning and Amy approaches her father and says "Teach me to ride the bike without training wheels today." The father agrees. He takes the training wheels off the bike. He teaches her how to make sure she has enough air in the tires. He double-checks her bicycle helmet. He looks up and down their dead-end street to be sure there is no traffic. Then he proceeds to hold the handlebar steady while Amy gets on the seat and prepares to ride her bike. While holding the bike steady, he calmly asks her if she is comfortable and ready to begin the lesson. She says "Yes." The father then proceeds to walk slowly along side of the bike for 10 to 15 feet while Amy peddles. He then runs faster for another 10 to 15 feet. During this test drive, he holds the handlebar so that Amy does not fall. After walking and running along side of the bike, he stops and asks Amy if she is ready to try it by herself. She excitedly says yes, after all, she has just had a successful experience. The father steps aside, his daughter tries to get on the seat and put her feet on the peddles at the same time, like her father had just taught her. When she tries to do this, she promptly loses her balance and falls down—her first failure experience. Then her father explains she needs to be moving in order for it to work. She then tries to peddle the bicycle for a few feet holding the handlebars perfectly still like her father had taught her. She falls again. This time she cries. Watching from a distance is her older sister, Cally, returning home from an early bike ride around town with her friends. Cally tells Amy that she is not trying hard enough and that she needs to peddle harder. So Amy tries one more time and falls again. Cally and her friends laugh.

In scenario two, the father runs along side of his daughter, Sue, holding the back of the saddle rather than the handlebars. The father encourages his daughter to move the handlebars so that she can feel her balance shifting as she rides down the road.

Sue will learn how to ride the bike before Amy. Amy will learn in spite of the way her father is teaching her because she will discover, even if never verbalized, that speed and subtle turns of the handle bar are the key to balance. Both parents wanted their daughters to learn. One parent, by accident or on purpose, gave his daughter an opportunity to get critical immediate feedback necessary for self-correction. This is the first and most important component of the Timely Feedback Model: Feedback is self-correcting. Regardless of what the fathers were telling their daughters, regardless of the length of instruction or perhaps even the quality of instruction, both daughters will learn because they will find a way to get direct feedback from the bicycle itself.

Timely Feedback is an Immediate Response, Not a Delayed Criticism

Other examples of feedback include the scored pavement along a highway breakdown lane that causes cars to shake when the tires ride on it, the burning sensation when touching a hot pan, drinking anything after a dental visit that included Novocain, echolocation, grinding gears on standard transmission, mirrors, etc. Tying a tie and putting on lipstick are both examples of tasks that clearly can be done best with a mirror rather than with someone else describing how to do it. The second component of the Timely Feedback Model is that sources of feedback (mirror, standard transmission gears, hot pan, etc.) never think about the feedback opportunity and strategically initiate/craft a message to the individual performer. The mirror does not interpret, misunderstand, analyze, or speculate about behavior, it simply reflects it. Feedback is a direct, immediate result or response to a behavior.

Every minute, hour, or day that passes between observing someone do something incorrectly and deciding upon the best way to address the concern decreases the power of the feedback. After a certain point, what might have been received as feedback could be seen as unwarranted personal attacks. This is the third component of the Timely Feedback Model: After a specific point the self-correcting value of a comment from a boss or teacher becomes more aligned with the boss or teacher's desire to strategically say something to change someone's behavior, losing the self-correcting value of timely feedback. When too much time passes, a comment that could have been feedback if spoken in temporal proximity to an event can be seen as an attack, triggering some degree of defensiveness. Another way of saying this is that timely feedback is self-correcting and criticisms expressed to a performer days after an event are other-correcting, grounded in someone deciding to change the performer and choosing remembered examples, arguments, or incentives to persuade the person to change.

Support for Defining Feedback as Self-Correcting

Many authors and researchers have contributed their definitions and opinions about feedback throughout the years. A few of these people have had a lasting impact on this author's beliefs and consulting practice.

Berlo (1960) described interpersonal communication as a process in which two people try to perceive the world as the other person perceives it. In his instructional 16-millimeter film (1965), he used the mercury switch in a home thermostat as an example of a feedback loop, a self-correcting feedback loop.

The following is a summary description of this film: "Dr. David Berlo explains that in order to attain the four principal objectives of management communication—attention, understanding, acceptance, and action—the manager must always watch for feedback and correct his communications accordingly" (Portland State University video library, retrieved June 28, 2005). The key theme is that feedback is the response to the manager's communication.

Gibb (1961) researched defensive communication for eight years and concluded the following: "Arousing defensiveness interferes with communication and thus makes it difficult—and sometimes impossible—for anyone to convey ideas clearly and to move effectively toward the solution of therapeutic, educational, or managerial problems" (p. 148). The communication patterns he discovered often form the foundation for training programs that teach people how to give feedback without arousing defensiveness. He noted that speakers who appear controlling, certain, strategic, and superior tend to arouse defensiveness. He also found that speakers who appear to have a problem orientation, speak provisionally, behave spontaneously, and engender a sense of equality promote a supportive environment, which is much more conducive to successful communications. A review of his work would suggest that the traditional performance review is a recipe for defensiveness.

Delays in receiving feedback also appear to arouse defensiveness. In practical terms, seeing someone make a mistake could result in a supervisor spontaneously shouting, "Why did you do it that way?" To the extent that the performer saw this as a reaction to a work mistake, the shouting could be seen as a spontaneous reaction, enabling the performer to know instantly that a mistake had been made and motivating the performer to correct the mistake to avoid hearing the supervisor shout in the future—self-correcting feedback. If, on the other hand, the supervisor made a personal note of the mistake and put it on the agenda for their monthly meeting, the conversation will be

preloaded with defensive arousing stimuli. First of all, the passage of time will enable both parties to remember the event differently. Secondly, if the performer saw the supervisor observing the mistake and taking no immediate action, it is feasible the performer could conclude this was a small mistake, one of no importance. Thirdly, the supervisor has time to strategize the approach, to control the environment, to become more righteous—all of which can easily lead to defensiveness. When the meeting finally occurs, the supervisor may use a strategy of asking the performer about mistakes that may have been made over the past few weeks. The supervisor may also use a sandwich technique of saying something kind, offering negative feedback, and then closing with something kind. Lastly, the supervisor may spend most of the meeting saying nice things, while the performer is squirming in a chair waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop. Feedback that occurs spontaneously has a much greater likelihood of being perceived as self-correcting and supportive. Feedback that is delayed has an increased likelihood of arousing defensiveness.

Griffin (1968) researched mammals' use of echolocation to orient themselves in their environment.

Most bats and many marine mammals orient themselves by a natural form of sonar. They emit orientation sounds that are adapted for this purpose and locate many types of objects at a distance by hearing their echoes. They maintain normal orientation during active movements without any possibility of vision, but become disoriented if deprived of hearing or if prevented from emitting orientation sounds.... The animal emits an orientation sound, hears the echoes, and alters its behavior in an appropriate fashion based upon the information conveyed by these echoes. While the source of echoes may be the body of another animal, only passive physical reradiation of sound waves is involved rather than active reply by the second animal.

The echolocation of stationary obstacles for many years appeared so incredible that no one ever suggested that small moving targets might also be detected by sonar. Nevertheless, in recent years convincing evidence has been obtained both from bats and from porpoises that insects and fish, respectively, are pursued under some conditions largely by echolocation. The accuracy and precision of echolocation implies that the auditory nervous system responds selectively to faint echoes from significant objects, despite a variety of other sounds competing for the animal's attention. (pp. 154-156)

A miscalculation of the location of a branch by as little as a few millimeters can prevent a bat from landing. It can also prevent the bat from being able to drink or eat. The consequences of a bat waiting for a mosquito to shout out "Yes, that's me; I am right here." would be starvation for the bat and survival for the mosquito. Sonar feedback is essential to some mammals' very survival. Echolocation is self-correcting feedback.

On the simplest level, work is acting upon the environment and the people in it. Planting a garden and creating a project plan have similar characteristics. Both will have an impact on the part of the world they touch. A great deal of feedback is available to the gardener as to how the plants are progressing and, depending upon the available feedback, the gardener may take additional actions. Feedback loops must, if they do not naturally exist, be designed into the project plan to let the project manager know progress is being made or, in some cases, progress is not being made and

someone needs to ascertain what is going wrong. Delays in feedback on a project plan can have serious time and cost implications.

Dance and Larson (1972) point out in their book, *Speech Communication: Concepts and Behavior*, when “an individual is producing speech signals he is simultaneously auditing his production. He can correct his production the individual can produce speech content directed toward himself as a listener and may employ such a process for the purpose of regulating his own behavior” (p. 34). They propose speech communication has three principle functions: (a) linking an individual with the environment, (b) enabling the development of higher mental processes, and (c) regulating behavior. This third principle is evident when a teacher modifies an instruction in response to a student’s behavior, when a car salesperson modifies a sales pitch after clarifying which member of the family has the checkbook, and when a manager assigns work to an employee more explicitly based upon the results (feedback) of the last assignment. In these examples, the individuals are self-correcting.

In 2002, the *Harvard Business Review* re-published the 1968 article “One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?” by Frederick Herzberg. This authoritative document has influenced students, teachers, and business leaders around the world. His theory and research led him to conclude that promises of rewards and fear of consequences may work at getting movement or compliance; however, such external bribes and threats perpetuated the need for more external bribes and threats. The motivation to improve performance was external to the person doing the performance. Herzberg states

The surest . . . way of getting someone to do something is to administer a kick in the pants—to give what might be called KITA. . . . Why is KITA not motivation? If I kick my dog . . . he will move. And when I want him to move again, what must I do? Kick him again. Similarly, I can charge a person’s battery, and then recharge it, and recharge it again. But it is only when one has a generator of one’s own that we can talk about motivation. One then needs no outside stimulation. (p. 4)

In essence, internal motivation is superior to external motivation. Similarly, self-correcting is superior to other-correcting.

Monica A. Frank of Behavioral Consultants, P.C., in St. Louis, Missouri, teaches and writes about the practical applications of sport psychology to martial arts training. In 2002 she published an article on the web entitled “Using Sport Psychology Skills to Improve Martial Arts Training: Teaching Self-Correction.” In researching martial arts training, Frank has concluded that “when we teach skills, our response to the student’s performance involves correcting errors or giving general praise, neither of which are conducive to teaching the student how to self-correct errors.” (p. 1) Teaching someone how to ascertain one’s own progress is critical to mastering a skill, or a job.

Without feedback of some type the individual may not learn at all or may learn incorrect information. However the problem that can occur with teaching is that feedback from the instructor regarding acceptable performance can make the student more dependent upon such feedback. Past research tended to focus primarily on the importance of external feedback; however, more recent research indicates that internal feedback can be even more important than external feedback when the student knows the skills but is working on consistently implementing correct

performance. In addition, research has indicated that frequent feedback may increase the student's dependence upon feedback from the instructor and that when the instructor is not present performance decreases due to the lack of reliance on the student's internal sources of information. (Frank, 2002 p. 2)

Feedback as Other-Correcting

The preceding researchers, scholars, teachers and writers have all contributed to this author's understanding of the functional role of feedback as a self-correction mechanism. There is a substantially larger body of literature that operates from the perspective that feedback is something that can be given to someone (other-correcting). The assumption establishes the giver of the feedback as the person in control—the supervisor, the teacher, the martial arts instructor, or the close friend. This assumption is typically presumed in the literature, without any reservation or analysis. One of the largest bodies of published material on feedback is in the area of performance evaluations.

Pearce and Porter's "Employee Response to Formal Performance Appraisal Feedback" (1986) is one such example. In their opening comments they describe performance appraisals as a particular kind of feedback and state, "One of the primary purposes of formal appraisals is the provision of clear, performance-based feedback to employees." (p. 211). They go on to use phrases very emblematic of the assumption feedback can be given: how the feedback is perceived, how the feedback is accepted, impact of the feedback on attitudes and behaviors, defensive reactions to negative feedback, employee reactions to being given "below average" ratings, etc. All these phrases presume feedback can be a newly constructed message delivered to someone days or weeks after an event. Such an assumption would be comparable to believing it was appropriate to watch a tennis player for a year and then tell her that her backhand is below average. Of what possible value can this have on improving performance? As another example, imagine a surgeon being told, at the end of the year, that her technique was average. Pearce and Lyman's findings that there are potential negative consequences for employees who receive satisfactory ratings rather than outstanding ratings definitely advances our understanding of the impact of annual ratings; however, their findings may have more to do with how people respond to perceived derogatory labeling than how they process feedback that can help them improve their performance.

Liden and Mitchell (1985) open their well-written and admirably researched paper "Reactions to Feedback: The Role of Attributions" published by the *Academy of Management Journal* with the sentence "Research on feedback ... has provided some data on how recipients react to feedback." In contrast to this opening, this author proposes feedback is the reaction to something done or said, not the presenting stimulus. The opening line indicates Liden and Mitchell believe feedback can be an initiated statement to which the recipient may react. They hypothesize and demonstrate that people prefer being given specific rather than non-specific feedback. The assumption that feedback can be given shifts attention from the real-time feedback process that is in operation in all people to the strategic crafting of messages that have value to the performer. With the message crafting perspective, the better the crafting the greater the value. This author suggests that message crafting research might more appropriately come under the headings of influencing, persuasion, or compliance gaining research rather than under the heading of feedback. When feedback is understood to be a self-correcting process, all feedback has value because it lets performers know if they are making progress towards their goal, whether that goal is cooking a meal or leading the reorganization of a department.

Pearce and Porter (1986) and Liden and Mitchell (1985) appear to reflect the majority position in the literature on feedback. In contrast, if feedback really is a self-correcting process, the key question to improving communication and performance is this: How do we enable others to learn from feedback that exists in their environment? This question has implications for everything from management development to skills training.

Development and Application of The Timely Feedback Model

Thus far, this paper suggests several working assumptions: feedback is a response; each person is the sole authority for what constitutes feedback; timely feedback has a very short half-life; feedback is a self-correcting mechanism in all of us and we are always grateful for positive or negative feedback; expressions of “feedback” designed to change or improve someone else’s behavior are “other-correcting” and, because of this, such messages are more likely to stimulate or increase defensiveness; and the comments and recommendations expressed a day or more later by most managers and teachers are opinions, ideas, suggestions, biased recollections, or stories, not feedback.

Efforts to find an existing model that could be used to visualize these assumptions and show the practical benefits of applying them were not successful. A new model was needed to visually communicate the value of timely feedback in teaching communication and improving performance. The new model also needed to address the organizational problem of supervisors’ reluctance to offer feedback (see Figure 1).

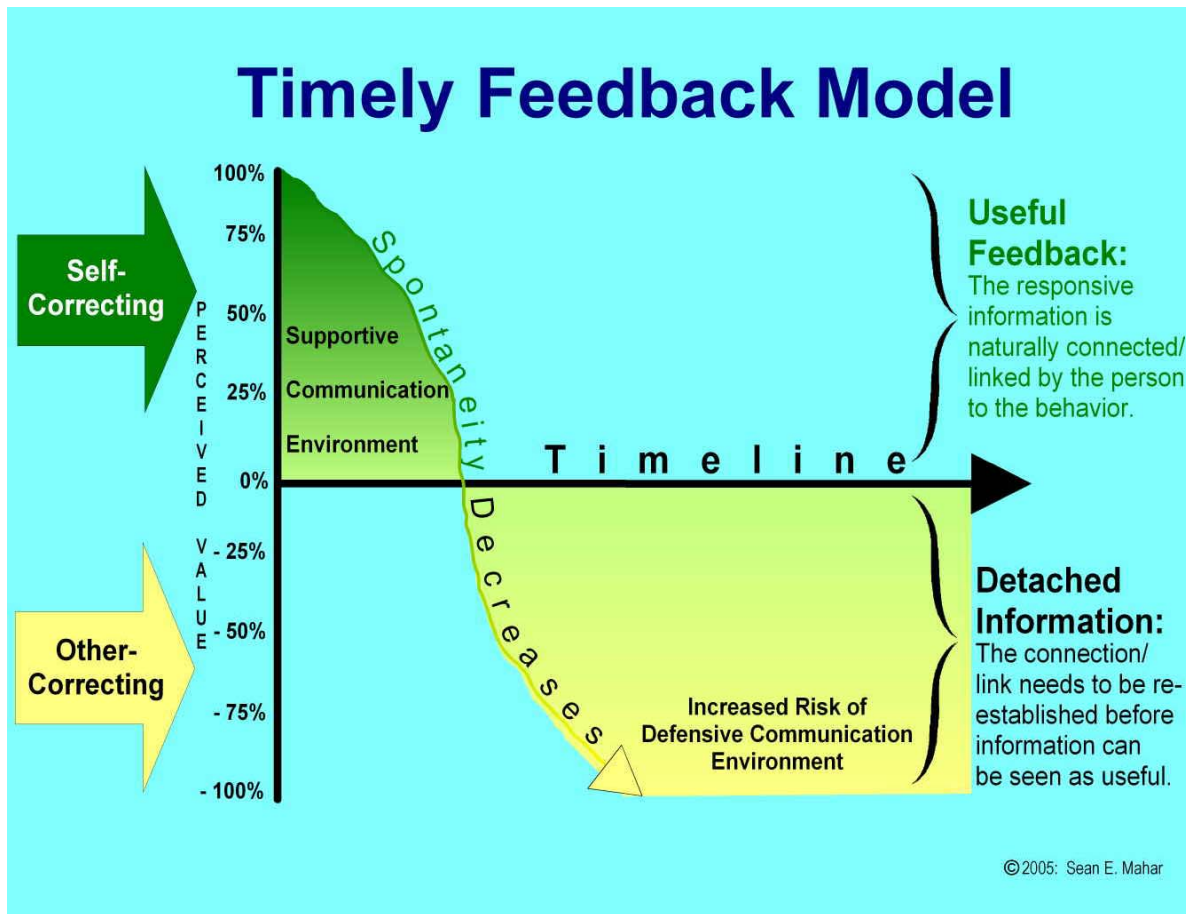


Figure 1: The relationship of time to perceived value of feedback and the impact on the communication environment.

As of this writing, the model has only been presented to a few hundred people (line managers, technicians, directors, nurses, physicians, and clinical/medical leaders) as part of workshops on performance management, interpersonal effectiveness and coaching. One organizational trainer incorporated this model in his training program on Performance Management. He modified his presentation on the role of managers to give ongoing feedback to their employees to the responsibility of managers to help their employees get more satisfaction from their work by showing them how to see their results (successes and failures) and learn from them (self-correcting feedback). When another organizational trainer conducted a class on interviewing she created worksheets so the managers could track the kinds of questions they asked (open ended, closed, etc.) without waiting for the instructor to tell them. Similarly, in light of this model, a group of physician residents taking a class on improving their interpersonal effectiveness were asked to put 10 pennies in their left pocket at the beginning of their shift and move one penny into their right pocket every time they paraphrased someone (patient, colleague, etc.). This request was made to give them a tool for monitoring their own efforts at increasing their frequency of paraphrasing, an important perception-checking skill for physicians. They were asked, at the end of their program, to invest just ten cents a day on improving their communication skills. All of these instructional examples are sample strategies instructors have actually used to give people opportunities to obtain self-correcting feedback.

The model has also been used as a diagnostic/instructional tool when providing executive coaching to approximately one dozen executives. When a senior leader in an organization needed some coaching on leading collaborative discussions based upon mutual interests rather than provoking arguments based upon polarizing positions, the executive coach used this model to create some exercises for the leader including asking her to count the number of times throughout the day that she used the word “but” (or however). One of the coach’s goals was to increase the leader’s awareness of her own argumentative behavior.

A more detailed example of using this model when coaching an executive involved a vice president of an organization who had been given some critical/negative information about the performance of one of his directors. The allegations involved the director being disrespectful to other employees at a business meeting, potentially compromising input on a major project. The vice president received a call from one of the people at the meeting and was asked if he, the vice president, would give the director feedback that his behavior was unacceptable, disrespectful, and in need of improvement. The vice president agreed to do so. Before confronting the offending director, the vice president contacted this author to plan the best way to raise this issue with the director, not wanting to strain their relationship. The initial assessment by the coach revealed several facts. Three weeks had gone by between the meeting and the phone call to the vice president—the feedback was much delayed. No one at the meeting expressed any concern to the offending director during or immediately following the problematic meeting potentially misleading the director into believing his behavior had been acceptable. Lastly, to the best of the vice president’s knowledge, the director had never done anything like this before, leading the vice president to question the accuracy of the complaint. After the consult, the vice president decided to phone the person who initiated the complaint and explain that no action would be taken at this time.

The person who made the complaint was an organizational peer to the director who was allegedly disrespectful. The vice president recommended the person who made the complaint “let this one go by” because it was too late to gain anything by raising it. The vice president also recommended that if this ever happens again, he wants feedback given to his director immediately. In summary, the vice president had initially agreed to take a position in the bottom right quadrant of the Timely Feedback Model over an issue that had no discernable business impact. For a period of several weeks, the vice president was extra attentive to his director at meetings they both attended. The vice president was looking for an opportunity to give timely responsive feedback if he observed any behavior that might be construed as disrespectful. None was ever observed.

A few weeks after this consultation, the vice president contacted this author to describe a successful application of the Timely Feedback Model. Earlier that day, the vice president observed one of his employees make a careless mistake. The vice president’s first reaction was to reach into a pocket to pull out a piece of paper and make a note to review what was just observed at a regular one-on-one meeting later in the week. As the pen touched the paper, the vice president reported, he visualized the Timely Feedback Model and realized he was passing up an opportunity for providing an honest, spontaneous response in favor of being able to get more comfortable thinking out what he wanted to say to the employee in a future meeting. He realized delaying feedback would risk increasing defensiveness with his employee. The vice president further realized that thinking out the best way to say something was a delay designed to make him more comfortable avoiding the confrontation. Taking such an action would not help the employee learn about quality. To help the employee learn, the vice president needed to react immediately, spontaneously, and unrehearsed—even if a little

uncomfortable. The vice president decided to do something immediately. He put the paper back in his pocket and began walking towards the employee thinking about saying something like “I know you can do better.” Suddenly the employee looked up and spoke first saying “Sorry, it was a careless mistake.” The employee apparently saw the vice president’s approach, immediately after making a mistake, as feedback. The employee’s response to this feedback was self-correcting. Now they could talk about more important things at their one-on-one meeting.

The Timely Feedback Model appears to be very useful in summarizing several key concepts covered in this paper:

1. Feedback is self-correcting
2. Feedback is a direct response, not a newly created message
3. Messages offered days or weeks after an event are “other-correcting”
4. Valued feedback must be timely
5. As time progresses, the value naturally deteriorates
6. Spontaneity decreases with the passage of time moving from spontaneous reactions to strategically orchestrated messages
7. When someone wants to change someone else’s behavior, after the window of opportunity for timely feedback has closed, there is a substantial tendency for even helpful comments to be seen as hostile, manipulative and/or controlling
8. The passage of time allows for other experiences to influence memory and behavior
9. Once too much time has passed, the original performer may have a very different recollection of what was done poorly, setting the foundation for an argument over what actually happened rather than a collaborative invitation to improve performance

Conclusion

Much of the research and writing about feedback appears to apply to what happens on the bottom half of the Timely Feedback Model. Another strategy is for leaders, instructors, and coaches to organize work, instruction, and practice opportunities in ways that enable their direct reports and students to take more responsibility for their own improvements by strengthening opportunities for real-time feedback. A major key is to show people how to discern useful feedback in their respective work environments. Several examples have been provided showing how this model has been, and can be, used to improved business communication and employees’ performance. The purpose of education is, after all, to create independence, to install generators, and to install continuous quality improvement skills so that learners can exercise their responsibility to monitor and improve their own performance.

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