# Harvard Business Review

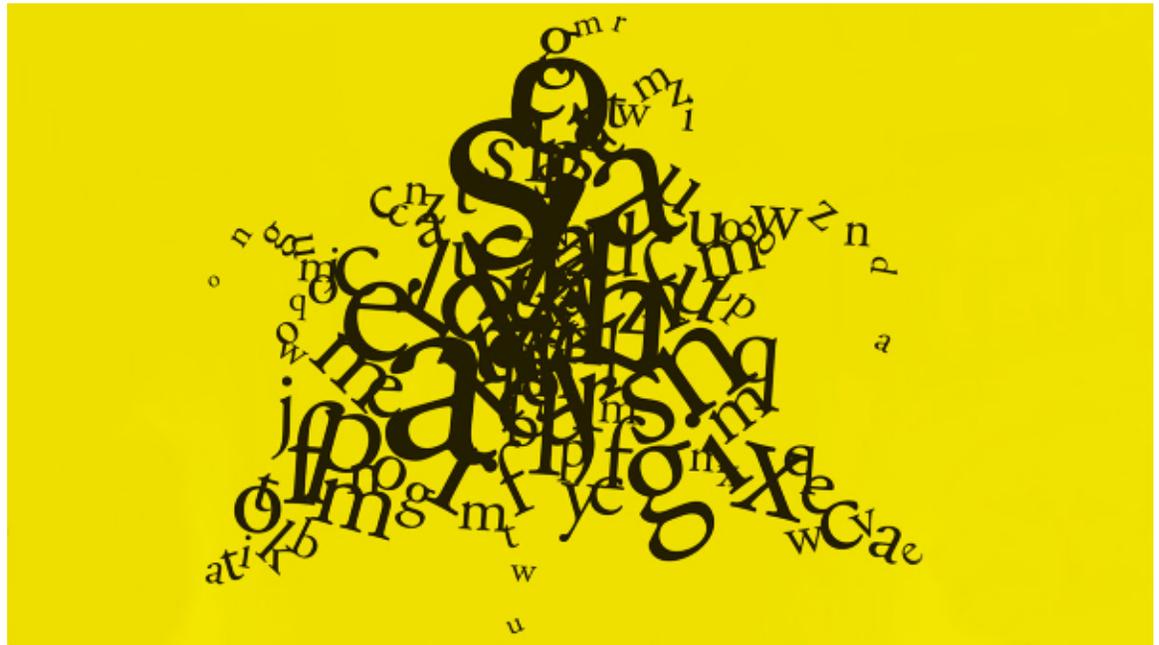## ARTICLE
### GIVING FEEDBACK

# How to Give Feedback People Can Actually Use

*by Jennifer Porter*

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Over the last decade, I've conducted thousands of 360-degree feedback interviews with the colleagues of the leaders I coach. My goal with these sessions is to get a better sense of my clients' strengths and weaknesses, but more often than not, the feedback isn't particularly useful.

How do you give feedback that helps someone learn and improve? This *strategic developmental feedback* requires careful thought and insightful construction. This kind of feedback is:

**Big-picture focused.** The most useful feedback answers this question: *"For this leader to be maximally effective, what should they do more of and less of?"* It takes a strategic view of what the leader is doing effectively and less effectively today, and what they might continue or change to achieve the organization's objectives in the future.

**Organizationally aligned.** Often, the feedback that people give me is based on the giver's *personal* leadership beliefs or preferences, and yet the most useful feedback starts with an understanding of what the *organization* values. When a feedback giver says "She has a great sense of humor," what they are usually saying is "Her sense of humor matches mine so I enjoy it. (And who cares if others don't like sarcasm!)" Strategic developmental feedback is based on the organization's leadership competency mode, a shared understanding of what effective leadership looks like, or even a comparison of the leader in question with another leader in the organization who is universally thought of as effective.

**Behavioral and specific**. Vague labels like "inspiring," "great," or "lacking executive presence," are of little use without more clarity. A leader needs to know that what they are doing is creating an impression, which then informs your label. The key word here is *doing*. Useful feedback should focus on what a leader is actually accomplishing.

**Factual, not interpretive.** Too often feedback is described with adjectives that interpret the leader's behavior: *She is self-centered. He lacks confidence.* Even if you believe a leader's behavior stems from lack of confidence, that is just your interpretation and may or may not be accurate.

**Both positive and negative.** For a leader to develop and increase their effectiveness, they need to know what they are doing well so they know to repeat it, and further improve upon it, as well as what they are doing less effectively so they can make adjustments. Despite the fact that many of us struggle to hear it, negative feedback serves as important fuel for other changes that are needed. And recognizing progress on meaningful work — which positive feedback highlights — is one of the best drivers of engagement, motivation, and innovation.

**Focused on patterns.** Leaders tend to get the most feedback on a specific event — how they communicated in one meeting or responded to one email. What is more helpful is feedback on patterns of behavior that leverage specific events as examples. Looking at patterns helps alleviate recency bias where we tend to recall and over-weight events in our near-term memory.

**Linked to impact.** If I tell a leader she is a clear and concise communicator, that may feel good and be intellectually interesting but not much else. If I tell her that her clear communication has motivated her colleagues and helped them better understand the company's strategy and what is needed from them, that will help her prioritize this behavior relative to other behaviors.

**Prioritized.** Adults can only focus on and work on a few concepts at a time. A VP of HR recently shared a list of 37 development areas the president wanted a senior executive to address. I asked how

the president prioritized the list. Her response was "They are all equally important." That executive is being set up to fail. There is no way he can effectively address 37 requested behavioral changes.

Putting it all together, instead of saying "Juan is afraid of conflict," strategic developmental feedback would sound like this:

*"Juan's top two strengths, in terms of their impact on the business, are his strategic thinking and his ability to build strong relationships. More on that shortly. The most important gap for Juan to address to get to the next level is how he navigates conflict. Our organization is very direct and values leaders who confront issues head on, without inauthentic positivity. The pattern for Juan is that when he does not agree with a colleague's position, he remains silent about his opposition. I'm not sure why he does this, but the impact is that I think he is in agreement when he is not. And later, when he shares his opposition with me, it is frustrating to me because we have already put a plan in place based on the belief that he was in agreement. It causes rework and it lowers my trust in him. Let me give you a few examples of when this has happened..."*

Creating feedback that is truly useful requires more care and attention than is typically invested. Like any skill — chess, golf, learning Mandarin — offering strategic developmental feedback requires that we pay attention to and do many things effectively and simultaneously. Given the opportunity to help others develop and become more effective, it's worth the effort.

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