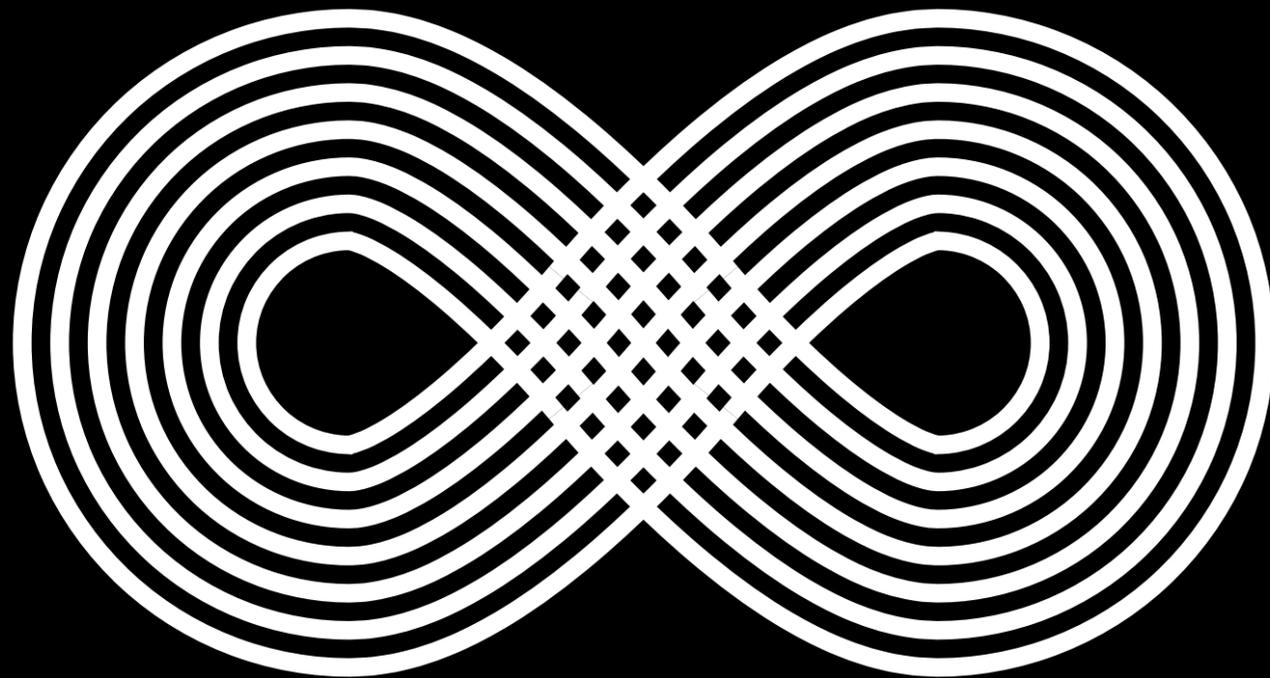


The black and white magic of feedback



Generally regarded as positive, even essential, for coaches, Professor **Erik de Haan** argues that feedback can also have a dark side...

This year, 2020, marks the 100th anniversary of the word 'feedback'.¹ During the 100 years of its existence, 'feedback' has delivered momentous gifts in terms of self-regulating systems, and it has arguably benefitted human relations in the workplace. Healthy, direct and sensitive feedback has led to many a 'role negotiation',² which has strengthened leadership and collaboration. Nevertheless, I see important risks in some of the latest guises of feedback, partly driven by social media, which may turn out to be anything but healthy and generative.

What is feedback in human relations and how does it work?

The word 'feedback' is exactly a century old, but it is constantly developing and acquiring new meanings. Its origins are in the earliest discoveries of electrical engineering, as it appeared on the patent of a transformer that consisted of a 'feed back circuit'.³ Non-electrical applications are centuries older: think of the float valve we still use in toilets or the 'fly-ball governor' that keeps a constant amount of steam in the cylinders of a steam engine. Later applications include thermostats, amplifiers, oscillators and logical circuits. The sound distortions that are created by feeding loudspeaker sounds back into amplifiers were used by electric guitarists, Jimi Hendrix being one famous example. Spectacularly creative results can be achieved by returning the output of a system back into its input signals – and this is also true in coaching.

The human mind itself is full of feedback loops. For example, we use gravitational and optical feedback to stay upright and to keep our eyes fixated on a moving object. When you know that there will be a feedback loop in the future, you will adapt and mitigate your behaviour in anticipation. At work, this is a very helpful property of feedback: you anticipate that the quality of your product or service will be checked, and therefore you make a bigger effort to stay within specifications and to delight your customers. However, when part of your service offer is to 'challenge' or 'confront' existing thinking in some way, your service may initially be less welcome to your client, which means that feedback loops could actually impoverish and reduce your service level, as I aim to show here.

The best use of feedback in coaching relationships

Directness and openness are obviously important in the coaching relationship. One could argue that a coaching session is suffused with feedback from beginning to end. The coach comes alongside you and reflects on what you offer to the session, openly sharing with you how this comes across. Similar to other helping, teaching and consulting professions, coaching works in large part through 'feedback' from the coach, and the days where coaches or therapists were advised to be a 'blank screen', neutrally absorbing but rarely responding to what they receive, are long gone.

The strongest forms of feedback for me are those inescapable moments that Daniel Stern has called 'now-moments' or 'moments of meeting'⁴: episodes where both coach and client are aware of their responses at the same time as they are meeting, which includes an awareness of each being aware. These have also been called moments of 'reflexivity' or of 'relational' coaching,⁵ where coach and client are explicitly looking at their own interaction and making sense of that

interaction, exploring what is happening right now, between them, while they are engaged in their encounter. These 'relational' moments provide the essence of good feedback: coach and coachee together form a living collaboration that is being reviewed by each of them independently and together. This review is made explicit and thus forms a starting point for further, emergent conversation, which comprises the feedback loop. (There is a subtle difference in feedback between review and evaluation, which is not always appreciated: review is undertaken in a spirit of inquiry and curiosity, while evaluation is based on a desire to measure, value and judge. Judging often forecloses learning and is therefore less helpful in coaching.)

This feedback is open and explicit, and it critically, consciously reviews the conversation or meeting up to that point, so there is a degree of challenge as well as of mutual recognition and reinforcement. The 'relational' feedback loop is only sustained when both coach and coachee can allow and bear a rupture, ie the emergence of a fresh insight into their relationship. In my experience, this kind of in-the-moment feedback only occurs in the presence of high trust, psychological safety, and openness to learning.

A client began speaking about a colleague who had recently joined his team, and who he found extremely unreliable and somewhat manipulative at work, eg he avoided many tasks and meetings. My client reported a kind of fascination with this person, and described him as a 'train wreck waiting to happen'. As we spoke about this for almost an hour, I began to realise that his issue was well outside the bounds of our contract and that I kept on asking questions because I too felt a fascination hearing about someone who pushes work boundaries to such an extreme. When I shared my 'parallel' feelings with my client, there was a real 'touché' moment where we both felt caught at prying into this 'train-wreck' person and his machinations. This then helped my client to see for the first time that he might have a responsibility for raising the disloyalty with his colleague and possibly also with their mutual line manager.

The worst use of feedback in coaching relationships

The single worst use of feedback is also very clear to me: when feedback is undertaken in a roundabout way, delivered from outside the relationship it refers to. Unfortunately, this roundabout way of delivering feedback is increasingly common today, exemplified by the encroachment of the NPS ('net promoter scores') on all service relationships. NPS are the old way of collecting feedback after a session, through 'happy sheets', rapidly becoming automated; compared and collated with other data about the helping relationship.

In modern business schools, NPS ratings are ubiquitous, sometimes occurring every hour of a programme, ie fully automated, using the mobile phones and laptops of participants. Participants increasingly use screens in class, which takes their focus and energy away from the helping relationship itself, weakening its impact. When those screens are used for setting up a feedback loop, the general distraction becomes worse.

Ratings of business schools, which are just one form of ‘offline’ or roundabout feedback, are directly proportional to the profitability of those institutions, even if we have no evidence that they correlate with their true impact. As a result, it has become evident that participants are now more pampered and pleased, and only rarely challenged. Moreover, faculty are being trained by their colleagues on how to request the in-class NPS in such a way that they achieve the highest possible ratings.

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True, in-the-moment feedback is a relational phenomenon and a here-and-now intervention, something that has been shown to be a powerful and helpful phenomenon in the helping professions

The first and biggest problem with NPS is that it opens up backchannels. Feedback and evaluation instruments take the feedback outside of the relationship that matters, ie the relationship between learner and coach/teacher. This triangulates the relationship and offers the client (and in some cases, the coach) a pathway to a third party, ultimately the institution or line manager of the coach, to potentially gossip and complain about the coaching.⁶ Of course, such a third party should always be available, but only as a last resort: eg if the client feels in some way oppressed or ill-treated within the coaching relationship. Usually, this is not the case at all, and then it remains much better for the client to raise issues directly with the coach.

In many of our own development programmes at Ashridge, we offer participants ample time for review in the teaching space itself, at least half an hour in the mornings and another reflective session in the late afternoon. This is a ‘live review’ with the group, which will often give valuable insights to everyone about how the learning community is doing, offering a challenging but relational way of reviewing the live relationships in the room. This may require some new learning in itself, because the challenging nature of open and direct feedback means it is unusual in most workplaces.

Another problem with NPS is that they introduce the premise that good learning relationships should always be ‘positive’ and score highly on the instrument. In other words, they introduce an expectation that learning is fun and should ‘feel good’. Clients with this mindset will experience a rupture; a difficulty in the coaching process or in critical evaluations as part of a 360-degree process, as if there is something ‘wrong’ with the process itself, or with them. Following from this difficulty of experiencing a rupture, clients often respond as if something needs ‘fixing’. In fact, we should expect important learning to be painful, something Edgar Schein captures in his idea of personal learning as a heroic battle between two existential and co-existing fears: the ‘learning anxiety’ and the ‘survival anxiety’.⁷ From this perspective, automated systems of feedback will only create more defensiveness against learning, and a culture of ‘likes’ imported from social media, which strengthen the pretence (and fallacy) that life – and learning – *should* be fun and eminently like-able.

A third problem with NPS is their potential for ‘sales’: business developers often pounce on high scores to sell more work to the same client or others in the same organisation. This may lead to mixed messages from the coach organisation and a general impression of neediness.

It is important to realise that, despite all helpful intentions, feedback systems can actually make learning less likely to occur, as it becomes more problematic and riskier to do, both for the coach and for the learner. To see how offline feedback is not only inhibiting for the client, bear in mind that feedback scores from clients using NPS become public and part of the discourse at the coach’s work, where back-office staff will administer the NPS and therefore see the scores; moreover, client directors may take up any indication of below-perfect scores with the commissioning client. Coaches are bound to become less daring or experimental in their interventions. They will want to avoid rocking the boat and so engage more in flattery and other niceties. Low performance ratings, open criticisms and ruptures within the coaching relationship could be starting points for important learning, if the coaching itself is not also foreclosed by third parties’ scrutiny of ratings nor diffused by the naïve expectation that learning should be fun and pleasant. The following case study demonstrates how an emphasis on feedback and evaluation can make the work unsafe for coaches and clients alike.

As part of a leadership development programme for a large company, participants could select a coach from a number of profiles. They were offered six sessions in total but the first three were taken up by various forms of programme-related exercises, written feedback and psychometric reports. When, by the fourth session, the work could finally get started, it did not come as a surprise when one of my clients asked me: ‘So tell me, what should I be working on today?’. By then, expectations were that I would lead sessions and the client would be a kind of ‘consumer’ of my interventions. After the final session, the human resources department gave every client a call to report on the quality of the coaching. Again, no surprise that given this opportunity, clients tried to find something critical to say about their coaching experience. Several of the clients reported observations of the coaching as ‘ineffectual’ or ‘meandering’, that it didn’t seem the best use of their time, or that they did not really know what it was about. Many coaches did not feel safe to take on new clients, in case their wider reputation might take a hit. Pressure on results, measurements of results, and roundabout feedback were emphasised to clients and coaches from the very start, with little opportunity for challenge or reflection.

A way forward?

Is the client really the best person to say coaching is going well? Would that not be the client’s line manager, direct colleagues or particularly their direct reports, who hope to see a more effective leader? Modern technology may help to

include these other stakeholders, but that is not the same as when all interested parties come together in person to discuss the developmental effort. I often feel we have not done so well in a session even though the client appears very satisfied – and vice versa. We have to allow for the possibility – not a rare possibility in my experience – that even a client who is not happy about the coach may still be benefitting from the coaching. Negative net promoter scores in cases of ‘remedial coaching’ may actually indicate that the process is working, not that it needs ‘fixing’.

Other than simply no longer requesting written feedback, as in most of my own assignments, I have experimented with two other ways of including feedback systems helpfully:

1. Undertake the ‘objective’ feedback process *ahead of* the intervention. Start your development programme by handing out the feedback forms. This brings your clients more of the conviction that they themselves can actually influence the outcome and NPS feedback scores, more than anyone in the programme, including their coach or teacher. In my experience, clients will become more responsible for the outcome if they can give the feedback in advance (this is sometimes called ‘feedforward’).⁸
2. If you must, then only ask for NPS when service provider and client are becoming less dependent on one another, ie towards the end of their collaboration. Then take it away from the direct relationship with the coach and make it clear that the feedback is being requested in order to promote the service to others. This seems the most ethical way of collecting feedback and will lead to the greatest number of ‘likes’, which serves the underlying ‘sales’ purpose.

True, in-the-moment feedback is a relational phenomenon and a here-and-now intervention, something that has been shown to be a powerful and helpful phenomenon in the helping professions. Authentic, honest feedback facilitates clients and coaches to do a live review of their work, which deepens their relationality and helps them to optimise the work.

It is important that coaching is safe for coaches and clients. Together, they have to create a ‘castle and battlefield’ situation⁹ where profound support and profound challenge can be built at the same time. I would argue that all clients can choose their

coach with intent but also vote with their feet if their expectations are not being met, so it seems to me that the request for feedback has more cons than pros. ■

Simon had recently been promoted to a role just below the board of a large multinational company. He was recommended executive coaching, as were many others in his position. Perhaps he knew it would be difficult, because he postponed the coaching for nearly a year, and then he found it difficult to choose the right coach and had to see many profiles. A 360-degree feedback process was recommended. I interviewed many of Simon’s colleagues and stakeholders, asking their permission to share any comments and wishes for the coaching process directly with Simon (with attribution, as I did not want to create a ‘roundabout’ feedback process). Although there were a lot of positives, there was also consistent feedback about his ‘board presence’: he was experienced as nervous, shy and somewhat withdrawn in large meetings. This feedback, although recognised, did somewhat crush him initially and Simon became rather agitated and tense at coaching meetings. His behaviour at high-level meetings and conversations did not initially improve. We had to sustain a few difficult sessions, where I felt guilty for bringing the critical feedback and Simon could not see a path to change. How to rise to these expectations? During coaching, I gave Simon space to think through his nervousness, the roots of which were found in bullying experiences at school, among others. New coaching themes appeared, related to the ruthless politics and attempts at exclusion near the top of his organisation. Finally, after some six sessions, another word that was regularly used in the initial feedback process, ‘thoughtfulness’, helped Simon to integrate his feedback and become more forthright in meetings and presentations. After eight sessions, we extended by another six and spoke again to Simon’s manager, who was full of praise for the work.

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