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Give Feedback That Helps People Excel

By Doreen Stern, Ph.D.

“This is s——!’ Steve Jobs yelled. ‘It’s advertising agency s—— and I hate it.’ It was the first time the young copywriter had met Jobs, and he stood there mute. He never went back.”¹

Most of us would agree that Steve Jobs’ notorious way of exploding at people wasn’t the best way to motivate them to improve. Yet that’s exactly how some “hard-edged” and “fearlessly candid” feedback systems function at fast-growing firms like Netflix and Bridgewater Associates, assert Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall in a *Harvard Business Review* article titled “The Feedback Fallacy.”² They argue that a different paradigm should drive the feedback process.

Excelling at work requires more than complying with company policies, completing projects on time and answering emails within 24 hours.

WHAT QUALIFIES BUCKINGHAM AND GOODALL TO PROVIDE ADVICE CONCERNING OPTIMAL WAYS TO GIVE FEEDBACK?

Marcus Buckingham is the head of people and performance research at the ADP Research Institute and coauthor of the forthcoming book *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader’s Guide to the Real World*. An earlier volume Buckingham coauthored in 1999, *How to Break All the Rules*, was included on a list of the best business books of all time. It describes what the world’s greatest managers do differently. In total, Buckingham has penned nine books, including *Go Put Your Strengths to Work*.³

Ashley Goodall is senior vice president of Leadership and Team Intelligence at Cisco Systems, Inc. Prior to joining Cisco, Goodall was responsible for leadership development and performance management redesign at Deloitte.⁴ He is coauthor of *Nine Lies About Work*.

The authors’ experience suggests they have considerable knowledge about the feedback process. This article concerns what they believe the purpose of feedback to be as well as techniques they recommend using to provide it.

WHAT’S THE PURPOSE OF GIVING FEEDBACK?

From Buckingham and Goodall’s perspective, the objective of providing feedback is straightforward: “to help people do better.”⁵ Accordingly, managers should ask themselves: “How can we help each person thrive and excel?”⁶

WHAT DOES HELPING EACH PERSON EXCEL MEAN?

Here’s an example from my own life that illustrates this concept. Long ago, when I was about to get behind the wheel of a car for the first time, my father gave me these instructions:

- Stay within the speed limit;
- signal before turning or changing lanes;
- leave one car length between my vehicle and the one in front of me for every 10 miles per hour of driving speed and
- turn on my car’s headlights at dusk.

Naturally, my dad’s tips were geared toward helping me comply with state laws. That’s key for an 18-year-old. But would his advice make me an excellent driver? Hardly.

As you and I will likely agree, focus and awareness are essential to being a skilled driver. Now, more than ever, we can’t predict when a distracted driver’s car might veer into our lane, traveling at 70 miles an hour, on an interstate. It happened to me at 11:30 one night. EEK!!!

Similarly, excelling at work requires more than complying with company policies, completing projects on time and answering emails within 24 hours. Rather, Buckingham and Goodall argue that *excellence depends upon each individual using their unique strengths*.⁷

WHAT ARE UNIQUE STRENGTHS?

Buckingham and Goodall claim that “excellence is idiosyncratic.”⁸ When they say this, they are expressing the view that excellence is inextricably entwined with our own individuality.



Thus the goal of feedback is to help us excel at using our personal strengths.

To understand this notion, the authors ask us to consider the comedians Steve Martin, Jerry Seinfeld and Sarah Silverman. The three exhibit dramatically different approaches to doing stand-up, based on who they are.

In his memoir, *Born Standing Up*, Martin proudly admits that he “was seeking comic originality and fame fell on [him] as a by-product.”⁹ He couldn’t sing or dance, yet at age 18 he taught himself to play the banjo “by slowing down banjo records on his turntable and picking out songs note by note.”¹⁰ Soon banjo playing became one of the unique attributes of his comedy act.

Because Martin loves playing so much, he continued doing it long after his stand-up career ended in 1981. In 2009, his album “The Crow: Songs for the 5-String Banjo” won a Grammy; in 2011 the International Bluegrass Music Association recognized him as Entertainer of the Year; in 2013 he and singer-songwriter Edie Brickell released a bluegrass album called “Love Has Come

for You” and started touring together. In 2015 they collaborated on the music and lyrics for the Broadway production of *Bright Lights*.¹¹ I was lucky enough to attend both the concert and musical. I was in heaven.

For his part, Jerry Seinfeld developed his own style of observational humor and witty banter. He makes it look easy; however, *he credits writing every day for an hour and developing a chain on his calendar as essential to his success*.¹² Like Steve Martin, Seinfeld extended his career by creating a new droll comedy series in 2012 called “Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee.”

Sarah Silverman rose to success by talking about taboo topics. For instance, she writes in the foreword of her memoir, *The Bedwetter*, that she’d “peed on mattresses up and down the Northeast Corridor and had used the topic of human excrement to vault her from obscurity into the global fame she enjoys today.”¹³ Who describes themselves that way?

The bottom line is these three individuals *do exceptional work in their own idiosyncratic ways*. As long as the audience is laughing,

there’s no predetermined way to be a comedian. Of course, few of us are signing up to tell jokes on stage. No matter, the authors ask us to extend this concept to our own work, too—to bring our whole selves in service of our calling!

WHAT TECHNIQUES DO BUCKINGHAM AND GOODALL RECOMMEND FOR HELPING PEOPLE EXCEL?

1. **Use different language when providing feedback.** “There’s nothing more believable and more authoritative than sharing what you saw . . . and how it made you feel.”¹⁴ So *share your personal reactions*, rather than prescriptions for how something should be done, as this chart excerpted from “The Feedback Fallacy” demonstrates:¹⁵

Rather Than	Try This
Can I give you some feedback?	May I share my reactions?
Good job!	Here are three things that really worked for me.
Here’s what you should do.	Here’s what I would do.
Here’s where you need to improve.	Here’s what worked for me, and here’s why.
That didn’t work.	I didn’t get that.
You need to improve your communication skills.	Here’s where I got lost.
You need to be more responsive.	When I don’t hear from you, I worry that we’re not on the same page.
You lack strategic thinking.	I’m struggling to understand your plan.

Source: Buckingham, M., and A. Goodall. 2019. The Feedback Fallacy: Why Feedback Rarely Does What It’s Meant To. *Harvard Business Review* (April–May), <https://hbr.org/2019/03/the-feedback-fallacy> (accessed September 3, 2019). Reprinted by permission.

2. **Call out excellence when you see it.** Since excellence is an outcome, be on the lookout for it, say Buckingham and Goodall. Turn to the person who created it and immediately call attention to it: “That! Yes, that!”¹⁶ By doing so, you’ll stop the natural flow and pull your colleague’s attention toward what worked. Then dissect it. They’ll experience a flush of pleasure, which will help them remember it.
3. **Ask questions.** The best information often comes from the person under the microscope. It can strengthen their sense of agency (feeling in control of their lives). Questions can grease the skids. These exist on a present, past and future continuum.

If, for example, someone solicits your advice, try asking them to tell you three things that are working *right now*. Doing so will

alter the person’s brain chemistry so they can be more open to new solutions, as well as to new ways of thinking and acting.

Try looking back into the *past, too*. Ask the person: “When you had a problem like this in the past, what did you do that worked?”¹⁷ This helps a person solve their own problem and gives them the confidence to move forward.

Finally, look to the *future*. Ask: “What do you already know works in this situation?”¹⁸ Be patient, yet operate under the assumption that the person already knows the answer. You’re merely the tour guide helping them uncover buried treasure. ■



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ENDNOTES

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- 2 Buckingham, M., and A. Goodall. 2019. The Feedback Fallacy: Why Feedback Rarely Does What It’s Meant To. *Harvard Business Review* (April–May), <https://hbr.org/2019/03/the-feedback-fallacy> (accessed September 3, 2019).
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- 6 *Ibid.*
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- 8 *Ibid.*
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- 14 Buckingham and Goodall, *supra*, note 2.
- 15 *Ibid.*
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- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*