



FEEDBACK AS FUEL, NOT FRICTION

For leaders in rapid ascent, feedback is vital. So why is feedback so rarely sought and given? Here's how to ensure your fastest-growing leaders are getting the feedback they need.

BY MATTHEW J. PAESE, PH.D.

Fact: Most feedback is delivered badly. Constructive input is tough to deliver, and even when intentions are good, it usually lands cold and prickly as straight-up criticism. And no one likes to be criticized.

That's particularly true for successful leaders who have sweated it out to get where they are in their careers, and even more so for those bounding up the ladder. Many are seen as having heaps of leadership potential, so their development is accelerated in hopes that they can take on bigger roles sooner

and help the company fill crucial leadership gaps. Too much feedback (ahem, criticism) can drain the confidence and stamina that's so essential for survival. So guess what? Most don't ask for it, and few are inclined to give it.

A vicious cycle spins. Accelerated growth sputters.

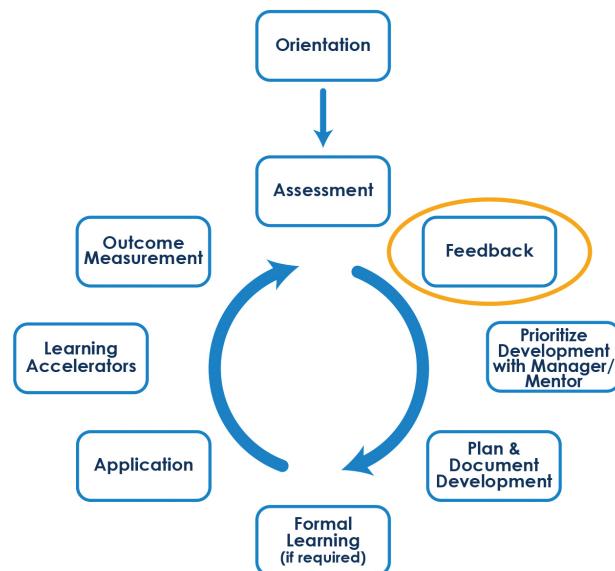
But leaders in rapid ascent face big risks, both business and personal. Accelerated development requires taking on more responsibility, and being placed on the spot to produce results—often with insufficient experience. It's all aimed at growing capability, closing development gaps, and addressing any negative personality traits (derailers) that might hold them back. So in the high-risk world of rising stars, operating

without high-quality feedback simply isn't a risk worth taking. Feedback is—or rather, should be—the fuel that propels a leader's growth. (This is true for leaders in the fast-growth lane, but it's also true for the larger population of leaders and individual contributors who need to grow and improve.) When feedback works, leaders develop a positive relationship with it—seeking it out, and making it a go-to aspect of how they tackle new challenges. But for most, this requires that feedback be reframed as fuel, instead of criticism.

How? By starting leaders on their high-speed learning journeys (the acceleration process) with a foundational feedback experience—a transformational moment in time that ramps up self-insight, and changes how individuals view feedback and its value to their success as leaders.

In the sample development process shown in the diagram below, feedback looks like one perfunctory step along the learner's journey. But when set up and delivered in the right way, feedback changes everything that follows—for the better!

The Acceleration Process – Learner View



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START WITH GREAT LEADERSHIP INTEL

While it might be tempting to hope that transformational feedback will come from naturally occurring conversations with current leaders or mentors, in reality, that's unlikely. Sure, there are a rare few with the gift of effectively sharing sage wisdom and insight, but they're the exception, and their input typically is based on their perspective of the leader's current or past performance.

Growth is about looking forward. When feedback catapults development, it paints a clear picture of a leader against the backdrop of likely *future* scenarios. It illustrates, with precision, how a leader's current behavioral habits and dispositions might play out if applied directly to a more challenging leadership situation.

So for feedback to have any chance of changing a leader's

approach, it must be accurate and complete, and this requires assessment. In fact, assessment and feedback might be thought of as the yin and yang of accelerated development—one does not function without the other. Remember, we're talking about feedback that creates powerful, relevant self-insight that leaders embrace and apply on the job. So for that reason, assessments that simulate future challenges are particularly useful because they offer individuals the chance to dive in and react to a bigger set of responsibilities. The results then illuminate the specific actions that can be taken to enhance performance.

This isn't just theory. Research suggests that feedback from simulation-based assessments (assessment centers) energizes the acceleration process by increasing receptivity and developmental action. A 2015 research study by Development Dimensions International, including results from 142 organizations, showed that more than 90 percent of assessment center participants were perceived by others as more receptive to feedback following a simulation-based assessment and feedback process. Participants also took more action on their development than those who hadn't been assessed. Follow-up discussions with managers and mentors, along with documentation of development plans, took place more than 90 percent of the time, as well.

But while accurate behavioral assessment data is essential, it is not sufficient without the right approach to the feedback session itself.

SIX KEYS TO DELIVERING FEEDBACK THAT ENERGIZES GROWTH

As they accumulate successes, leaders develop fairly entrenched self-images, at which point it becomes more difficult to offer them new perspectives on how to be successful. So the best feedback coaches help participants come up with their own epiphanies.

Great feedback is *guided self-discovery*. When handled skillfully, the feedback discussion inspires bold action, because the learner makes new discoveries about how to advance and succeed as a leader, as well as how to make a bigger difference in the business. Here are six keys to making that happen.

1. Don't just plan to deliver a message—plan to generate insight. A typical approach to preparing to deliver feedback would involve the "coach" (professional or amateur) poring over all the available information about the leader—career history, job performance trends, aspirations/motivations, multi-perspective (360) data, assessment center results, etc.—to identify patterns that illuminate growth opportunities for the individual. Then the coach would consider the best language to express these observations to the learner, and make a case for growth.

Coming from reliable sources, these likely will be well-reasoned conclusions, and most coaches would seek ways to *explain* them. The typical outcome? Most of the time, the leader will agree. After all, what choice does the leader have, given the sources and amount of data from which the conclusions came?

But agreement is not the goal. *Insight* is. Acceptance of the coach's well-reasoned conclusions might feel like success in the moment, but acceptance falls far short of catalyzing action. What's needed is a different way to discuss the coach's input and a more intentional method of involving the

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individual in shaping conclusions. This means bringing a business-relevant perspective and being prepared to amend it with another's insights. A coach's conclusions are more likely to create insight and energy for growth if they are prepared and positioned as hypotheses the coach and leader will test together.

2. Focus on behavior and its impact in future situations. Feedback often fails to have impact because it overemphasizes the past. *"You were too informal and unstructured in that board presentation. You lost credibility, causing the chairman to question whether we've made the right investments. I'd like you to work on your presentation style."* This is obviously important feedback, and a broad-shouldered leader would take it in stride and do some things differently in the next board presentation. But exactly what he might do differently would be open to question, and this backward-looking feedback wouldn't do much to inspire the kind of accelerated growth the leader needs.

Perhaps this coach wasn't concerned with accelerated growth, but the approach often characterizes feedback for acceleration, as well. When working with individuals to uncover inspiring insights, instead of focusing on the past, it is far more optimistic to focus on behavior and its impact in future situations. This doesn't mean abandoning the description of the past. But the feedback will have more positive developmental impact if balanced with a description of what, specifically, good performance looks like and a discussion of the positive impact of change. An alternative approach: *"Influencing our board is crucial, and I'm going to need your help to be stronger in your presentations. Next time, I'd like to see you adjust your informal style to be more confident and fact-based. I can see you being highly influential in this setting, but it will mean adopting a more poised and formal approach."*

3. Make feedback relevant to the business first, then to the individual. Feedback coaches gain trust more readily when they demonstrate that they first are seeking to understand the business and the participant's role in it. An early exchange about current role focus, pressing business challenges, future aspirations, and self-perception of strengths and weaknesses allows individuals to feel heard and recognized as unique. This tailors the feedback to the leader and also equips the coach to anticipate reactions. It also helps the coach gauge how to best package messages for maximum insight and influence, and, in turn, clearly tie results to future implications for success or failure.

4. Don't be satisfied with an agreeable session. A good coach comes equipped with a well-prepared point of view about the individual, ideally backed by good data from an assessment. But a good feedback coach also is prepared to be wrong. Because the goal is to translate observations into insights and actions, feedback recipients must fully process feedback messages into their own terms and context. This means asking the individuals to state their understanding of the messages.

Simply accepting the coach's interpretation is not sufficient. An inspirational feedback session pushes the leader to take ownership of the feedback message by encouraging her to challenge the coach's words and perspectives and make them her own. This happens when healthy, respectful debate is a planned aspect of the discussion.

5. Be very specific. It's one thing to understand a leadership skill such as leading change or strategic influence, but quite another to know precisely what actions to take to become better at them. Competencies (skills) are clusters of related behaviors, but being effective does not mean being good at every single one. Take leading change: Some of the behaviors necessary to master the skill include identifying important change opportunities, encouraging others to generate different approaches, and breaking down the natural resistance to change. In most cases, leaders won't need to work on all of these. Focusing too broadly slows the growth process, and doesn't reinforce the effort. Accelerated growth builds momentum when the leader is able to pinpoint the specific behaviors that will improve effectiveness, and observe progress as they are applied.

6. Don't run from tension. Feedback can create anxiety for both the coach giving the feedback and the leader receiving it. So it can feel like a breakthrough, and even cathartic, to both parties to surface and discuss all perspectives and opinions (including those that are controversial and unpopular), and arrive at the *real truth* about the individual. But be careful. While dispatching the tensions associated with finding the truth about the individual, it is important to remain focused on a healthy and optimistic tension between the leader and the future. Once a feedback coach has arrived at the peaceful moment of clarity about the leader's capabilities, it is essential to immediately turn to building a case for why growth is valuable, for the business and personally. Building tension should be coupled with building confidence. It's important to emphasize how strengths can be maximized and aspirations met by addressing underlying growth areas.

MOVING AHEAD

By the end of a great feedback session, the coach and leader will have, together, reframed what great leadership will look like in future situations, and how it differs from being successful right now. The leader will have begun to take the lead in identifying the highest-value development actions to speed the route to readiness for future assignments. Together, they will have prepared the leader to go forward to discuss these development priorities with managers, mentors, and any others who may play a role in supporting growth.

The leader will not simply feel relief that the process has concluded, but instead will feel a sense of excitement, optimism, and measured concern about what it will take to continue down the path of success. Feedback will not have been an exercise in surviving criticism. It now will be regarded as an essential source of fuel that will power growth through challenges long into the future.

And the leader will want more of it.

This article is adapted from the book, "Leaders Ready Now: Accelerating Growth in a Faster World" (DDI Press, 2016). 

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