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Avoiding the feedback monsters

Using behavioral insights to develop a strong feedback culture

Avoiding the feedback monsters

Technology, globalization, and growing government regulation are reshaping the way people learn, collaborate, and lead. At the same time, the talent market has become driven by demand. Organizations are now rethinking their talent strategies at all stages of the employee life cycle. New, innovative HR programs including total rewards, learning, and performance management are required to attract and keep critically needed talent. Given the complexity of these changes, many organizations are finding it a challenge to navigate the path forward. That's where we can help. Deloitte's talent, performance, and rewards services will help ensure that your people strategies support your broader business strategy.

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Introduction

IN 2001, theatergoers flocked to see a movie that would eventually generate more than \$550 million. It was about a 30-year-old accountant who is disillusioned by his job and life. But then one day, his mother sits him down and shares with him a book of his childhood drawings. He was a creative child and many of his pictures were of colorful, monster-like characters. The next day, one of the monsters shows up at his house. Soon other monsters appear as well. The man is unable to shake them. He soon realizes he is the only one who can see and interact with them. They follow the man to work, on dates, and just about everywhere he goes. Convinced he is going crazy, he suddenly realizes that each monster represents a fear he has held onto since childhood and the only way to make them disappear is to conquer each of his fears.

Do you remember the movie? It was called *Monsters Inc.*

That's not how you recall the story line though, is it?

That is because this version of the movie was never made. The initial concept described above went through numerous feedback sessions and multiple design iterations until the version we are all familiar with was released. In his bestselling book, *Creativity Inc.*, author Ed Catmull describes the culture of feedback at the movie's production company, Pixar,

and how critical it has been to Pixar's enduring success. Pete Doctor, *Monsters Inc.*'s director, admits that while he and the crew found these frequent feedback discussions and iterations difficult and time-consuming, the crew "never believed that a failed approach meant that they had failed. Instead, they saw that each idea led them a bit closer to finding the better options. And that allowed them to come to work each day engaged and excited. . ."¹

Although most of us don't have our sights set on producing the next blockbuster film, there are clear benefits to cultivating a workplace in which feedback is given and received in the productive manner described by Catmull. A recent Bersin by Deloitte report says that organizations achieve a 21 percent boost in business results when leaders embrace a culture of coaching.² Another study conducted by the *Harvard Business Review* said that employee engagement suffers when leaders are unable to deliver effective feedback. It found a direct correlation between employees who averaged in the bottom 25th percentile in terms of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and desire to stay and those who ranked their leaders lowest at providing quality feedback.³

Most leaders would agree that cultivating a culture of feedback is necessary for business success. But deciding which techniques to use to help ensure that

Striking the right tone in delivery can be akin to walking a tightrope: Lean too heavily on data, and the message may be drowned out by the receiver's emotional response to the information. Tip-toe around the message too much in favor of emotional safety and your feedback may lack substance.

feedback is effectively received, understood, and acted upon is typically the broader organizational challenge. Take just one dimension of feedback: delivering bad news. This could entail discussing with a colleague what they need to improve upon, or relaying the unenviable message to senior leadership that a project is going off the rails. In either case, research shows that these are very difficult messages to deliver or receive.⁴ Bad news must be carefully crafted, have the right person delivering it, and take into account the organization's propensity to sugar-coat or distort information.

Delivering any sort of feedback in general can benefit from taking a holistic approach. While not all feedback is negative, providing constructive feedback can make all parties feel uncomfortable,⁵ is often stressful, and requires more than mere logic and data points to relay an effective message.⁶ As a result, striking the right tone in delivery can be akin to walking a tightrope: Lean too heavily on data, and the message may be drowned out by the receiver's emotional response to the information. Tip-toe around the message too much in favor of emotional safety and your feedback may lack substance.

A DELOITTE SERIES ON BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

Behavioral economics is the examination of how psychological, social, and emotional factors often conflict with and override economic incentives when individuals or groups make decisions. This article is part of a series that examines the influence and consequences of behavioral principles on the choices people make related to their work. Collectively, these articles, interviews, and reports illustrate how understanding biases and cognitive limitations is a first step to developing countermeasures that limit their impact on an organization. For more information visit <http://dupress.com/collection/behavioral-insights/>.

To address this delicate balance, we look to the behavioral sciences for guidance. The behavioral sciences field combines psychology, economics, and neuroscience to paint a clearer picture of how people think and act upon information—often in a manner that's, unknowingly, not in their self-interest (see the sidebar, "A Deloitte series on behavioral economics and management" for more details).

The four elements of effective feedback

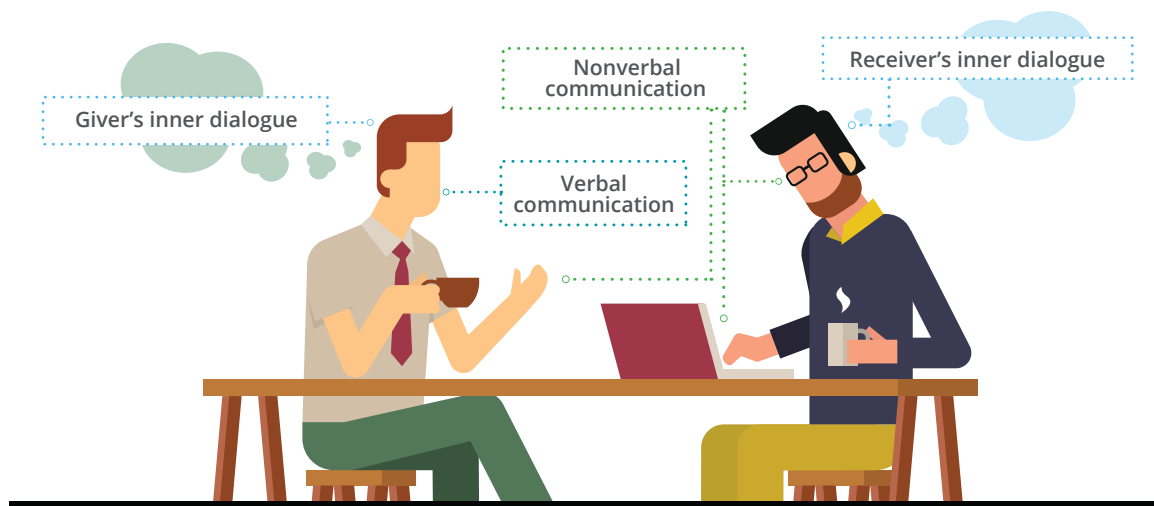
WHEN it comes to feedback, the overarching question is: What kind of feedback results in positive action and constructive change, and what has the opposite effect? For matters of organizational management and human resources, the *Deloitte Review* article, “HR for humans: How behavioral economics can reinvent HR” suggests that all HR practices should be designed in a spirit that reflects the latest insights from human psychology.⁷ In this vein, our research suggests that effective feedback should be offered in a manner that incorporates the belief systems and intentions of both the giver and the receiver. Absent these considerations, feedback is likely to be a frightening experience and fall on deaf ears.⁸

To address the question above, we have identified four elements of effective feedback (see figure 1). These elements outline the key factors that exist in any feedback discussion:

1. **The giver’s inner dialogue**—beliefs about the receiver and his abilities and/or character and even the giver’s current emotional disposition
2. **Nonverbal communication**—the body language, tone, and facial expressions between the giver and receiver
3. **Verbal communication**—the spoken words between individuals may get the most attention, but of the four elements of feedback, it is often the least impactful
4. **Receiver’s inner dialogue**—beliefs about themselves, the feedback giver, the feedback, and the situation

To illustrate what can happen when constructive feedback goes awry, we’ve created a few scenarios featuring “feedback monsters.” While these monsters can make delivering effective feedback a

Figure 1. How feedback is given and received



nightmare, we've offered recommendations for how to avoid them.

The irritable monster. *It's 10am on a Tuesday morning. Irritable Jeff is already having a bad day, and it's about to get worse. He is dreading his next conversation: He has to share bad news with Kathy, one of the employees on his team, that the project she spearheaded was not well-received by the senior management team. In fact, it's been scrapped altogether. Instead of taking a break to clear his head, Jeff calls Kathy into his office immediately and delivers the bad news in a somber tone, reflecting his disappointment with the outcome. The conversation is short and clipped; after, Kathy flees to her desk, trying to hold back tears.*

What went wrong here? Before providing feedback, Jeff failed to carefully consider his own inner dialogue, and, specifically, his mood. This can be problematic because moods are often contagious; as Daniel Goleman, psychologist and author of *Emotional Intelligence* explains, we unknowingly mirror the emotions we see in others, and internalize and experience them ourselves.⁹ So Jeff was clearly upset when he began his conversation with Kathy, and she, in turn, internalized those emotions, and was left feeling distraught.

It's important to note that mood contagion is not all bad, as this is the basis for empathy. It also explains why we have emotional reactions to watching movies or reading fiction. Even in low-stakes activities, researchers in one study observed that when people listened to recordings of others experiencing positive and negative emotions, their brains registered similar responses on an MRI.¹⁰ Put another way, research shows that feedback will be met more positively if the giver is exhibiting a positive emotional state, and more negatively if the opposite is true.

That said, the costs of setting the stage under a cloud of negativity, such as the irritable monster scenario above, can be dire. Neuroscience research demonstrates that negative emotions trigger a stress response, shutting down the parts of the brain where creativity and openness to new ideas

reside. Positive emotions, meanwhile, help receivers envision possibilities and create long-term change.¹¹

How, then, does a feedback giver elicit a positive emotion in the feedback recipient? It starts with what is happening in the giver's own mind. Adopting the belief that the feedback given will have a positive outcome is not always easy due to a cognitive bias known as the *fundamental attribution error* (FAE). This common bias describes the tendency of people to judge others' actions as being a result of their fundamental disposition or character, while judging themselves and their actions not as being driven by their character, but as a result of situational factors.¹²

Enter Felicia, the FAE monster. *Felicia is a manager who believes that one of her direct reports, Terence, lacks strategic business acumen because he doesn't speak up, put forward solutions, or even ask probing questions in meetings. Terence, however, feels that his behavior is entirely due to the situation: He is introverted, and finds it impossible to speak up in meetings that are dominated by overbearing colleagues. If Felicia's FAE goes unchecked and she fails to afford Terence other opportunities to contribute and share ideas, his level of engagement and performance will likely suffer.*

Tip No. 1: Accentuate the positive, reduce the negative

Feedback givers can combat their tendency to make fundamental attribution errors by adopting a different mind-set. Rather than choosing to believe the receiver is battling an innate, immutable character flaw, givers can try to approach the encounter through a skill-building lens, framing the message in a way that would help receivers handle similar situations more favorably in the future.

Think about the coach who counsels an athlete to become a stronger, more flexible basketball player by adding a crossover dribble to his game instead of telling the player he can't drive to the hoop. In the corporate world, this translates into feedback givers focusing on desired behaviors and helping

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receivers build skills to add to their arsenals. Here's an example: A team member, Jill, provides great content in her presentations but her slides are excessively detailed and difficult to follow. Instead of focusing on how "wordy" Jill is, her manager could adopt more of a coaching approach, suggesting to Jill that she augment and improve the impact of the

message by adding some eye-catching graphics to each slide.

By choosing this direction, feedback givers can overcome FAE-driven tendencies to assign blame to receivers' character or abilities, while reducing their likelihood of sending overly negative messages.

Nonverbal communication

Tone and body language trump dialogue

RECOGNIZING the importance of your inner dialogue can help set the tone of feedback and hopefully get the conversation off on the right foot. However, once the initial message is delivered, the receiver will most likely respond with nonverbal cues, which often drive the conversation more than the content of the message. As a feedback giver, it is important to understand and appropriately react to these responses.

It's important to note that nonverbal information often trumps verbal content. In one experiment, subjects were asked to rate video recordings of participants reading various passages. These passages ranged from friendly to hostile, and the individuals reciting the passages were instructed to demonstrate a range of nonverbal cues—congruent, neutral, or incongruent—relative to the messages in their readings. Subjects who were asked to assess the feelings of the participants assigned up to 13 times more importance to the nonverbal over the verbal content.¹³ And recent neuroscience research showed that even in situations where a person's attention was directed away from nonverbal cues, cerebral activation patterns demonstrated an attentional bias toward the nonverbal signals.¹⁴

Tip No. 2: Be attuned to “micro expressions”—both yours and the other person's

Within the broad realm of nonverbal cues, the importance of facial expressions cannot be overstated. Facial expressions offer particularly powerful nonverbal information, especially “micro expressions,” which are unconscious, universal, uncontrollable, and last only a fraction of a second. Since the 1960s, Dr. Paul Ekman has studied these facial changes extensively and has found that there are seven uni-



versal micro expressions: happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, fear, contempt, and surprise.¹⁵ This is why the inner dialogue as mentioned above is so important. If there is any incongruence between what the feedback giver believes about the receiver and what they are actually saying, the receiver will most likely only believe the nonverbal micro expressions. They may not even be conscious of them, but the micro expressions will still have a significant impact on the messages they receive.

Meet Ian, the incongruous monster. Assigned the role of project manager on a pivotal marketing initiative for his company, Ian called his team together to report back on the feedback he received earlier from his boss, the CMO. He began the meeting by telling the group that the CMO “really likes the direction we’re taking and our progress so far. We have her full support.” While saying this, though, Ian, who was known to be easygoing and affable most of the time, was pacing back and forth nervously and frowning. He then launched into tactical next steps and assignments, unaware of the signals his nonverbals had sent. When the meeting was over, team members filed out sheepishly; a few gathered in the kitchen area to try to figure out what the problem might be.

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It is also important to read and react to the receiver's nonverbals as well. While micro expressions last only fractions of a second, research shows that they can be learned and identified.¹⁶ In practice, if you are a feedback giver and see *disgust*, *anger*, or *contempt*, chances are the receiver disagrees with what you've said or has negative feelings about you. This should signal to you that you should consider spending more time with the receiver establishing

trust and rapport. A micro expression of *surprise* may signal that the receiver doesn't believe what you are saying. In these cases, you should probe further to better understand the receiver's frame of reference, using specific examples to gain mutual understanding. If the receiver looks *afraid* or *sad*, that person has likely shut down and no more information can be absorbed.

Verbal communication

Where negative content comes into play

WHEN nonverbal and verbal communication are congruent, a feeling of authenticity often results, building trust and rapport and increasing the likelihood that feedback will be considered and acted upon. As stated earlier, a positive state of mind is central to creating an openness to feedback. However, acknowledging only positive messages alone is not sufficient. To create change, feedback givers must also address negative situations and emotions.¹⁷

How can negative feedback be presented in a way that will ultimately be most effective? First and foremost, feedback givers should ensure that positive messages far outweigh negative ones. In a study analyzing the role that feedback plays on team performance, researchers discovered a critical ratio of positive-to-negative (P/N) feedback that correlated to high performance outcomes (see sidebar, “How much positive vs. negative feedback?”).¹⁸ The lowest performance took place when there was more negative feedback than positive feedback. Providing twice as much positive-to-negative feedback achieved adequate, but not stellar, performance. To achieve high performance, a consistent 6:1 P/N ratio was required.

Interestingly, this 6:1 P/N ratio is almost identical to that found by research evaluating the positive to negative interactions between married couples and their likelihood of divorce.¹⁹

Tip No. 3: Appreciate, coach, and evaluate

Many people, of course, heed the well-worn advice to “say something nice first” before launching into a critique. But while the exact ratio of positive to negative feedback may differ across situations, the research described above suggests that the amount

of positive feedback needed to gain a receptive ear for negative feedback could be greater than many of us might think. In other words, saying one nice thing at the beginning of a feedback conversation is likely not enough; feedback givers may instead want to lead with four to six positive comments before

HOW MUCH POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE FEEDBACK?

In one experiment, 60 business teams were categorized into three subgroups based upon business performance.²⁰ These performance measures were based on a combination of attributes such as profit and loss statements, customer satisfaction scores, and internal 360-degree evaluations conducted by a variety of team members. From these metrics, teams were categorized as high-performing, medium-performing, or low-performing.

When any of the teams conducted a meeting, coders, who were unaware of the team’s performance classification, would categorize the nature of the team’s interactions as either positive or negative. Actions were considered positive if the dialogue demonstrated support, encouragement, or appreciation. For example, if someone said, “That’s a good idea,” the interaction would be scored as positive. Alternatively, if feedback showed disapproval, sarcasm, or cynicism, such as, “That’s about the dumbest thing I ever heard,” the interaction would be coded as negative.

The highest performing teams often exhibited six positive interactions to every one negative interaction (a 6:1 P/N ratio), while the lowest performing teams had more than three negative comments to every positive (a 1:3 P/N ratio).

broaching the issue of concern. But how can this be done in a way that feels (and is) authentic?

In their book, *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, authors Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen assert that feedback falls into three categories—appreciation, coaching, and evaluation.²¹ To put a more effective P/N ratio into practice, feedback can be categorized into these three types:

- **Appreciation** is, by nature, positive and, according to the behavioral sciences, a strong source of intrinsic motivation. So when an employee is shown appreciation, he is more likely to innovate more and engage in the well-being of the organization—even without additional monetary rewards acting as a carrot.²²
- **Coaching**, especially if targeted toward helping the individual reach her ideal self, is also positive. To create an environment where coaching can happen, feedback givers should first frame their inner dialogue to adopt a positive, skill-focused approach when initiating conversations.
- **Evaluation** can be the trickiest type of feedback and the one most prone to negativity. Evaluation is scoring, much like the tests we took in school. The objective may be exceeding, meeting, or missing sales targets, for example. Often, a number does not leave much room for the subjective considerations of the circumstance. For example, in theory, a salesperson should objectively be measured against their sales target. However, if salesperson Erin misses a target due to an inventory shortage caused by external factors, her coach may want to incorporate subjective information into the feedback. In this case, the coach can have a conversation on how to still achieve sales goals with other products or services available during the operations issue. This helps create a healthier and more forward-looking feedback discussion.

Planning your feedback conversation beforehand to highlight aspects of appreciation, coaching, and evaluation can further the chances that your message is both heard and acted upon.

Understand the receiver's inner dialogue

FEEDBACK givers often have limited resources at their disposal to uncover how a receiver is processing information. Consequently, givers, and, more broadly, organizations may want to take a forward-looking approach by offering tools and training that facilitate transparency and reduce the likelihood that receivers discount feedback.

Tip No. 4: Use containment charts to *give* feedback, videos to *train* for feedback

Feedback givers can provide organizational tools to help minimize impulsive reactions and mitigate the likelihood that a receiver feels like feedback is either a personal attack or simply off-base.

Feedback containment charts can be helpful (see figure 2) to address the first issue.²³ This tool forces receivers to face their own monsters by answering two questions: “What is this feedback about?” and “What isn’t this feedback about?” In other words, if the boss critiques a subordinate college professor about publishing 50 percent fewer articles than others in his peer group, the answer to the question, “What is this feedback about?” could be that the professor is not as productive as he could be regarding publishing his work. On the other hand, “I am not a good researcher, I can’t write well, and I’m not a valued team member” would fall into the category of “what this feedback isn’t about.” Especially for formal feedback sessions, organizations may encourage their feedback receivers to use a containment chart since it forces a dispassionate assessment of the feedback, providing better balance and a higher likelihood of future appropriate action. Furthermore, for feedback givers, containment charts offer a direct view into the inner dialogue of receivers. Similar to reacting to micro expressions, givers can

Figure 2. An example of a feedback containment chart

What this feedback is about	What this feedback isn't about
I need to increase the amount I publish	I am not a good researcher
I need to focus more of my time on publishing my results	I can't write well
I should learn from my contemporaries how they are producing more output	I'm not a valued staff member
Publication outputs are valued here	I need to get my resume ready, my job is at risk

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use this information to appropriately adjust their conversations.

Leaders can also develop training to help both givers and receivers reduce the likelihood of falling victim to the FAE. One promising method was brought to light by research in which people were videotaped while receiving and responding to feedback. Subsequently, when they watched themselves on the recording, they had a tendency to dissociate and literally see themselves as different people. This view provided a more balanced way to listen to the feedback, making them more susceptible to change.²⁴

While not always practical to record live feedback sessions, you can practice providing and receiving feedback in recorded training sessions. And when training, be sure to also record a normal, low-stakes conversation with your partner beforehand. This will allow both givers and receivers to compare dialogue and nonverbal behavior, during both pre- and post-coaching moments.

Conquering your feedback monsters

GIVEN the various ways the four elements of feedback can be challenging and tricky, as outlined above, it's no wonder these can be scary conversations. For managers looking for ways to manage their own feedback monsters and deliver feedback more effectively, here are some places to start.

When formulating feedback, fight your tendency to blame or globalize, due to the FAE. If left unchecked, these tendencies will lead you to frame your feedback in a way that the receiver will be primed not to hear. Instead, focus your message on the need to change specific, observable behaviors that the feedback receiver can control. And try to

approach the encounter with a feeling of enthusiasm and goodwill: Your own positive emotions can help put the feedback receiver in a more receptive state of mind.

When choosing the time and place for a feedback session, know that as the feedback giver, you set the tone of the feedback session. If, like the irritable monster, you are not in the right frame of mind, pause and reschedule to allow yourself a chance to regroup. Also, nonverbal cues can make or break how the verbal message is received. Make sure you are choosing the best possible environment (ideally face-to-face or an uninterrupted private conference or video call) to convey the message with appropriate words, tone, and other nonverbal cues.

When giving feedback, congruence between what you say and how you say it is of utmost importance, because nonverbal signals will most likely be the default information that is processed. Understanding how to read and react to micro expressions can help you build trust and rapport. Also, although positives are important, so are the negatives of the message. But for the feedback to be most effective, positives will need to far outweigh negatives, optimally in a 6:1 ratio.

Also be cognizant that the feedback loop works best when those involved understand not just how to give, but also how to receive feedback. If the receiver reacts in an overly negative or critical manner in their self-assessment, you can use a feedback containment chart to better translate your message into action. The giver can also show empathy by providing examples of feedback he has received in the past.

There is no requirement to do everything at once. Identify one recommendation from the four elements and put that into practice first. Then pick another item in the model and repeat. For example,



you might choose to learn the seven universal micro expressions. Once that skill is achieved, move on to the next.

Also, be aware that every conversation is a dynamic feedback loop in which the giver and receiver frequently change positions (see figure 3 for a summary of the four elements).

By keeping these feedback elements in mind and practicing these techniques, not only can you help others conquer their own feedback monsters, but they are positioned to accept and grow into their ideal selves, helping to create a dynamic, innovative culture that embraces positive change.

Figure 3. The four elements of effective feedback

Feedback elements	Calls to action
Giver's inner dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid the FAE by staying positive and ensuring their beliefs about the receiver are not based on innate character issues • Understand the receiver's career "ideal self" • Believe and frame feedback as skill-building to achieve this "ideal self"
Nonverbal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believe what you are saying; if you don't, it will most likely show in your nonverbals • Learn to identify and respond to micro expressions
Verbal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recall the importance of the 6:1 P/N ratio • Consider providing four or five appreciative or coaching comments for each evaluative comment
Receiver's inner dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate feedback containment charts to disassociate emotion from message • Practice and record giving and receiving feedback

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