Guide – Feedback Culture
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Feedback and Conflict Resilience

Poor communication and weak relationships can undermine whatever a group is trying to do. Many groups fail to thrive due to an inability to manage interpersonal conflicts. Transitioning toward conflict resilience may involve asking: What social infrastructures can groups put in place before big disturbances or conflicts arise? What will help groups navigate turbulent times together, so relationships become stronger and deeper?

A feedback culture is a foundational aspect of transitioning toward conflict resilience and a more collaborative group culture. Ideally it supports self-awareness, cooperation, learning, and conflict resilience in groups. Feedback can be framed as positive, helpful, and supportive, deepening relationships, increasing awareness, and transforming unhelpful tendencies (see Re-Framing Conflict). A feedback culture is based on group agreements around offering and receiving feedback in ways that are helpful and easily integrated (see Offering and Receiving Feedback).

In nature, feedback is important for maintaining organism or ecosystem health and adapting to changing circumstances. The same is true for human relationships, groups, organisations, and social systems. Feedback provides information about impacts arising from activities and behaviours within any system. Feedback can be a simple and straightforward communication about an impact that an individual's actions are having on others. Feedback can help individuals to learn and grow, improving how individuals show up in a group, strengthening and deepening relationships, keeping communication clean and clear. Feedback can help groups to more effectively work together, deliver their work in the world, and positively affect wider society.

Individuals are not always at their best. They might be a little careless in their interactions, doing or saying something that unintentionally causes harm or creates a misunderstanding. This might impact or affect others in ways that weaken relationships.

An individual can't always perceive themselves clearly; sometimes others can. Individuals might have awareness gaps, unconscious habitual behaviours or beliefs that limit or affect their interactions with others.

If such awareness gaps and small impacts remain unrecognised and unaddressed, they can build up over time into tensions, blocks, or conflicts. This can adversely affect relationships, and a group's ability to achieve desirable outcomes. A feedback culture aims to address this.

While transitioning toward a feedback culture, feedback becomes a normal part of the group culture, rather than feeling uncomfortable, separate, or scary. A feedback culture tends to frame feedback as welcome, easy to offer and receive, and no big deal.

Important considerations

What are some important considerations when transitioning toward a feedback culture?

Barriers.
It can feel scary to offer or to receive feedback. Many people prefer to avoid a confrontation, feeling that it might lead to defensiveness, mind games, judgments, or escalate into a conflict and damage relationships. If someone offers feedback and it is not received well, they may become reluctant to offer feedback in the future, for fear that it will again not be received well. It might feel easier to let it go, to say, "It doesn't matter," "I can get over it" or "I can deal with it."

In group cultures where time and energy are perceived as scarce, offering and receiving feedback skillfully can feel like too much time and attention to process, like an energy or time investment not worth prioritising. An investment in a group process can save time in the future, preventing small tensions from building up and ultimately damaging relationships, projects, and groups (see Task-Process-Relationship, see Burnout to Balance).

Style and preference.
Individuals have different styles and preferences based on their background, including how they prefer to offer or receive feedback. Feedback can look different because of different preferences relating to cultural background, class, and ethnicity (see below for more on Hofstede's cultural dimensions).

Some people prefer quick, direct, and clear feedback; while others prefer slow, indirect, vague, 'nice' feedback. Overly indirect and 'kind' language can seem vague and confusing to someone used to more direct feedback. For example: if someone from an indirect culture offers feedback to someone from a direct culture, it may be misinterpreted. One person may interpret it as an optional request, to be followed or not; while the other person may think they have given 'clear' instructions which they expect to be followed.

Power, privilege, & rank.
In groups, power dynamics can affect feedback. For example, someone who has more power, privilege, or rank in a group may feel more comfortable offering feedback. Someone who perceives themselves as having, or who actually has, less power, privilege, or rank may feel they have fewer choices about receiving feedback.

People can be unconscious of their rank or privilege, and not realise that their feedback may be received differently than others'. For example, someone holding a 'highly ranked' role, like a position of responsibility, can be given more power in a group. Their feedback can be perceived as having more importance than others'. Even in groups attempting to distribute power more evenly, people may unconsciously give more power to those in highly ranked roles. An inner transition can involve becoming more aware of the rank that comes with certain roles; learning to take care when offering feedback; and considering how role, rank, and privilege can affect how feedback is received (see NEON Guide to Power and Privilege).

People more accustomed to a clearly hierarchical setting may assume that feedback will be affected by familiar power dynamics. In a less hierarchical setting, however, where power dynamics are more fluid and less well-defined, feedback may have different connotations and interpretations. Developing a feedback culture can benefit groups who are transitioning away from hierarchy, toward more distributed power-sharing.

For example: role review. In a hierarchical group, a superior's feedback may have the power to determine a subordinate's advancement or removal. The role is inflexible, given more importance than people who are replaceable. In a non-hierarchical group, team members' feedback can help to determine how roles can adjust to best fit members' needs. The role is flexible, given less importance than people who are not replaceable.

Guidelines

How can groups co-create simple guidelines that most people can agree to? That are accessible and not too scary? How can people get more comfortable and skillful in offering and receiving feedback?

Group relational agreements.
A group transitioning toward a feedback culture aims to consciously develop practices where offering and receiving feedback are easy and skillful. Making a few group relational agreements can address expectations about feedback, and help to normalise offering and receiving feedback.

These might include:
- Prioritising growing as individuals and learning as a group.
- Addressing small tensions before they grow into large conflicts.
- Offering feedback as information intended to help each other with awareness gaps.
- Offering and receiving feedback within a short time frame: 'short feedback loops'.

For more examples of group relational agreements, see Transition Network's website (https://transitionnetwork.org/about-the-movement/how-we-work/culture/)

Appreciation.
Appreciation is an important foundation for a feedback culture, and a good way to practice and normalise feedback. Regular appreciative feedback builds and reinforces a baseline of trust, increasing strength and resilience in relationships, making constructive feedback much easier to offer and to receive (see Offering and Receiving Feedback).

Within a context of appreciation, when offering constructive feedback, people can trust it is likely to be received well – "I know my colleague and we value and appreciate each other. My constructive feedback is simply about one specific behaviour or incident." When receiving constructive feedback, people can trust it is grounded in good intentions – "I know my colleague and I have a strong relationship. They must have a good reason for offering me this constructive feedback."

Tips:
● Share appreciative feedback sooner rather than later. Be specific: what did you appreciate about their behaviour or actions?
● Structured or formal appreciative feedback can feel contrived or uncomfortable. Authentic or informal appreciative feedback can feel easier to receive.

Little and often.
Transitioning toward a feedback culture can feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable. Regular opportunities to practice can increase familiarity and confidence, while supporting an agreement to address tensions when they are little, before they can grow larger. Some groups make time and space for offering feedback quickly or immediately, as a way to practice.

For example: At the end of every group meeting, try having a round for feedback. What was done really well? How was the facilitation? How did the meeting flow? How did people show up? What was useful and helpful? What tune-ups or improvements could be made?

Another helpful practice may be regularly inviting feedback, rather than offering it without invitation. Asking the question, "Would you like to give me any feedback?" aims to increase choices, and to help people get more comfortable with offering and receiving feedback. Feedback can become more common, less scary, and less about finding a separate time and space. This supports normalising feedback as part of the group culture.

Consent about timing
is an important aspect of a feedback culture. Before offering feedback, ask when the other person would be willing to receive it. Be willing to hear that now is not a good time. This helps offered feedback to be received well. Ideally, the person receiving the feedback can have the capacity to listen well, consider the feedback, and integrate it in a good way. This is unlikely to happen if feedback is offered when someone is stressed, distracted, finishing an important project, or meeting a big deadline.

More extroverted people can benefit from taking some time to reflect, to better offer feedback cleanly and clearly. For more introverted people, who may find offering feedback uncomfortable or scary, there is a danger of waiting too long. Try to avoid rationalising away or repressing the feedback. Try to offer feedback sooner rather than later. This avoids tensions developing so much that you either dare not offer it, or it grows into a 'charge' (see Offering and Receiving Feedback).

Setting.
In a public or group setting, people can feel embarrassed or ashamed to receive feedback. If someone has a background where there was more of a shaming or judgmental group culture, public feedback can trigger emotional reactions or defensiveness.   Some people find it more comfortable to receive feedback one-on-one in a more private setting. You can make requests about the setting you prefer. For example: "*I welcome your feedback on how I'm doing in my role, since I'm new at it. Please give me feedback one-to-one rather than in front of the group. In that setting, I find it very uncomfortable to receive feedback*."

Personal responsibility.
Your emotional reactions to others' behaviours are your own personal responsibility. They can be partially or largely influenced by your personal background, beliefs, preferences, or sensitivities. Because of something that happened in your past, someone's behaviour may be triggering or painful for you. That person may not intend it, but you feel hurt, triggered, or angry in response to their behaviour.

Part of a feedback culture can be making an agreement to do your best to take responsibility for your emotional reactions, and to avoid offering someone unconstructive feedback based on your reactions.

Discernment.
Before offering feedback, it can be helpful to self-reflect and discern whether what you want to offer is actually constructive feedback. Is what you want to offer:
- making an observation or sharing information that feels neutral and straightforward?
- something you think might serve the other person, your interactions with them, your relationship, or the larger group?
- something that perhaps they are unaware of?

Or

If you feel more emotionally charged and tangled, perhaps more helpful would be a different process than feedback – like a Clearing, mediation, or a restorative process. These can be more helpful contexts for sharing difficult emotions, clearing a tension, tending a relationship, or addressing a difficulty. Clearings can be wonderful opportunities to strengthen relationships, and they differ from offering feedback. A Clearing benefits from a structured and well held process, whereas constructive feedback typically does not require this (see Offering and Receiving Feedback, see Clearing Procedure).

Developing a group's feedback culture relies on increasing discernment and self-awareness. Individuals can learn to become a witness or observer of their inner landscape and how to interpret their emotions. Helpful questions include: "What is happening in me? Why is it happening? What does it tell me? How is that helpful?" (see Inner Feedback for Personal Resilience).

Forgiving easily.
 In any transition that involves developing new ways of relating and communicating, it's easy to make mistakes or to get new practices wrong. Invite an attitude of what John Maxwell calls 'failing forward:' forgiving each other easily and often; sharing and celebrating mistakes and failures. If a group doesn't forgive each other easily, and learn to laugh at mistakes together, transitioning a group's culture can be more difficult (see Sharing & Celebrating Failings, see Empathy & Compassion).

Transitioning any aspect of group culture typically involves a learning curve. New practices can feel awkward at first, as there is a lack of experience in knowing how to do them 'well'. Transitioning toward a feedback culture takes time. People will likely make mistakes. Celebrating mistakes, and forgiving each other easily helps to increase group resilience. (see Task-Process-Relationship, see Sharing & Celebrating Failing).

Willingness.
Be open to receiving feedback, and willing to make time for it. Try to respect the offer of feedback, to be curious about it, and try not to take it too personally (see Offering & Receiving Feedback).

Cultural Dimensions

Any transition in group culture will likely involve simultaneously increasing certain cultural practices while decreasing others; moving away from one type and toward another. While a process of culture change may never be 'complete,' it can be helpful to be able to describe preferred starting and ending points – where a group is moving 'away from' and 'toward'.

Anthropologist Geert Hofstede has described important cultural dimensions in communication practices. These dimensions represent a continuum of similarities and differences among cultural groups, rather than fixed positions. No culture is purely one-dimensional; certain situations may highlight one dimension or another. Regardless of the dominant culture, variations typically exist depending on subculture, context, or individual. The six Dimension Maps of the World demonstrate these cultural dimensions by nation, broadly observing the dominant culture of each.

Collectivist	Individualist
High Context	Low Context
Power Distributed	Power Distant
Collaborative	Competitive
Uncertainty Tolerant	Uncertainty Avoidant
Long-term	Short-term
Indulgence	Restraint

Collectivist – Individualist

A collectivist culture places the needs and interests of the group above the individual's desires or motivations. By contrast, an individualist culture reverses this so that the individual's personal goals have higher priority than those of the group.

High Context – Low Context

In high-context communication, the relationships between people affect and can add to meaning; communication and meaning do not solely rely on words. Low-context communication relies mostly on the translation of words to decipher meaning. In nations like the USA, Germany, and Sweden a low-context culture is considered dominant; while in Japan and China a high-context culture is considered dominant.

Power Distributed – Power Distant

Power-distance refers to the extent to which societal power, prestige, and wealth are distributed within a culture. Cultures with high power distance have societal power and influence concentrated in the hands of a few rather than distributed throughout the population. These cultures tend to be more authoritarian, and people are expected to display respect for those of higher status. For example: children are expected to be obedient toward parents; they are not treated as equals. Communication may limit interactions and reinforce the differences between people. 'Superiors' and 'subordinates' consider each other existentially unequal. Power-distributed cultures are more egalitarian and social stratification less pronounced.

Collaborative – Competitive

Competitive cultures strive for the maximum possible distinction between polarised social roles -- men vs. women, winners vs. losers, insiders vs. outsiders. Such cultures place a high value on assertiveness, competition, and material success. Collaborative cultures permit more overlapping of social roles, placing a high value on quality of life, interpersonal relationships, and concern for others.

Uncertainty Tolerant – Uncertainty Avoidant

Some cultures feel more or less threatened by uncertainty, with greater or lesser need for predictability, written or unwritten rules. Uncertainty-avoidant cultures maintain strict codes of behavior; have a belief in absolute truths, precision, and punctuality; are active, aggressive, emotional, compulsive, intolerant, and security seeking. Leaders are expected to be experts who have all the answers. Uncertainty-tolerant cultures are contemplative, less aggressive, less emotional, more relaxed, accepting of personal risks, and relativistic. Leaders are admired for humility and not knowing all the answers. People work hard only when needed, and there are no more rules than necessary.

Long-term – Short-term

A long-term orientation includes thrift, persistence, having a sense of shame, dedication, motivation, responsibility. Such cultures value ordering relationships, work dynamism, commitment, loyalty, and organizational identity. A short-term orientation reverses most of these.

Indulgence – Restraint

Indulgence cultures tend to allow relatively free gratification of natural human desires, enjoying life, and having fun. These cultures value individual happiness, well-being, leisure time, personal freedom and control. Restraint cultures believe gratification needs to be curbed and regulated by strict norms. Positive emotions are less freely expressed; happiness, freedom, and leisure are not valued so highly.

Activity

How might these descriptions help your group's transition toward a feedback culture?

Try considering some of these questions on your own, or discussing them with your group:

- How would you describe the kind of culture your group is transitioning 'away from'? Is it more collaborative or competitive? collectivist or individualist? uncertainty avoidant or uncertainty tolerant?
- How would you describe the kind of culture your group is ideally transitioning 'toward'?
- What is your ideal vision for your group's culture? What would be different from how it is now? What specific steps might help your group's culture transition toward your ideal vision?
- Consider a few of Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Which of these do you think are most important for your group to focus on? Why?
- In the present, where on the spectrum of each dimension would you place your group's culture?   Closer to what you're ideally transitioning away from? or transitioning toward?
- In the past, what specific changes have helped your group to transition its group culture? In the future, what kinds of changes do you think would be helpful?

Summary

Ideally, a feedback culture will encourage straightforward and easy conversations, reducing situations where feedback gets stuck – where offers of feedback are not received; or someone ends up ruminating or chewing over a situation alone without offering feedback. Ideally, people can seek support, try to see the issue differently (see Re-Framing Conflict), and eventually offer feedback with enough skill that it is well received.

In an ideal feedback culture, people are:
● grounded most of the time, aware of their own emotions and needs.
● open to listening to others' emotions and needs with an attitude of curiosity.
● compassionate and appreciative of each other.
● able to connect with each other, feeling relatively calm.
●

Transitioning toward a feedback culture will ideally help groups become more resilient, develop stronger and more honest relationships, be more effective, have more fun, and be more creative.

Summary

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