

Fostering Flow, Feedback and Forward-Thinking Communications

By Isabelle St-Jean

With the start of another New Year to ignite greater aspirations in our minds, let's revisit a very simple concept with complex implications—aspirations without communications are unlikely to be achieved. It is in the free flow of those communications, fed continually by quality feedback, that we find the grounds for turning aspirations into very real innovations.

As per the concept of *Flow*, let's turn our attention to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's classic book of the same title, in which he defines it as "the optimal experience"—that which we all seek in generating a rich and satisfying quality of life, at work or in personal realms. Peeking into the anatomy of the "flow" experience, we find that it occurs at a particular crossroads—wherein a heightened sense of one's skills rises to meet the challenge at hand in a specific, goal-directed, action system in supported by performance feedback.

Finding Flow in the Workplace

For athletes and artists, finding their flow is quintessential to their success and style, and as such more obvious. However, what are the conditions conducive to generating that integral experience of flow, that engaging state of being and doing which makes us innovative, productive and positively contagious to our team? Especially in current techno-driven times when most everyone is subject to extreme distractibility, we are wise to seek and better understand how to cultivate these conditions.

Considering that these best moments tend to occur when our body or mind is stretched to its limits, HR professionals, as leaders, can inspire and foster the motivation and desire to stretch ourselves in this way. Naturally, this also requires the willingness to sustain effort over time. Most certainly, if HR professionals help to infuse the work culture with a desire to champion their people's strengths and help them surpass themselves, the organization becomes sure-footed on the landscape leading to flow and a strong bottom line.

The Feedback Loop

Imagine working with a level of concentration that is both vast and deep so as to illuminate answers to solving problems that become new efficiencies or innovations. Given that our social selves better thrive while being witnessed and acknowledged in our efforts and their results, it's imperative that we provide the quality of feedback and communication that further supports the conditions leading to flow states and enhanced productivity.

Trending in the field of HR is an increasing appreciation for coaching skills to help bring out the best of employees and infuse the work culture with more trust, empowerment and a sustained

desire for performance improvement. As part of the transformational coaching model described in *The Heart of Coaching*, consultant Thomas Crane explains how to use create a high-performance coaching culture that helps everyone rise to new heights of ambition and achievements. Feedback flow in organizations, like course correction in aviation, enables us to continually adjust our mindsets and actions to stay engaged and reach desirable results with less stress, more flow and ease.

Five Forward-Thinking Communication Tips

In Crane's book, the feedback loop is used for the purpose of creating mutual learning, and to deepen insights and respect between colleagues. Its five steps, engaging a forward-thinking style of communication, are as follows:

- 1. Be present, state the topic or issue and its context, share your positive intention and request permission.** Begin by introducing the subject and its context as well as establishing the positive outcomes that you intend to achieve in your feedback-based coaching conversation. The permission check ensures that the time and place works for both of you so that you might continue with the conversation or schedule it for later.
- 2. Share feedback by describing behaviours and impact of those behaviours.** While giving feedback on performance or behaviours such as work habits, style, or sense-of-urgency, remember to be objective and non-judgemental while communicating your observations and perceptions.
- 3. Ask learning questions to explore experience and beliefs.** This step enables the HR professional to learn about the assumptions, beliefs, values and perceptions that all stand behind the employee's actions. Once this is revealed and better understood, both parties are in a better position to figure out what each might do differently.
- 4. Reflectively and empathically listen.** Too often overlooked, the importance of listening with heart and mind is imperative in this feedback loop. Simply reflecting or mirroring back what you hear from the person given feedback helps to convey empathy and builds trust. Making statements which demonstrate your understanding, even if you may not agree, deeply enriches the conversation.
- 5. Explore shared accountability in co-creating the situation.** The final step of the feedback loop is for both parties to share their perceptions and respective responsibilities for in contributing to the outcome, be they performance or behaviours. For example, the employee might share a perception that he or she is feeling stressed and negatively impacted by the lack of communication and overly high expectations of the team leader. In

this case, the HR professional benefits by asking in what way employee would feel better supported and encouraged to improve their performance.

Another Year, Another Review? Think Again

The above described feedback loop can be practiced in the context of a system of communication that includes steps to move forward, often referred to as forwarding-the-action in the field of coaching. Following the feedback loop approach, forwarding-the-action comprises of soliciting and suggesting options, requesting specific changes and commitment, clarifying consequences, offering support, appreciation and debriefing. Then, regular follow-up conversations can be arranged to help sustain accountability and commitment towards desirable changes.

When feedback is smoothly and appropriately free-flowing among teams, emotional intelligence becomes heightened because the contents of the feedback stimulate more self-awareness which in turn enhances one's ability to improve behaviours and performance. Furthermore, when people work in a culture of trust and transparency—where they feel heard and sense their strengths being championed—they are more likely to tap into flow states.

With frequent feedback and ongoing communication, rather than annual reviews, employees will more readily choose—can more easily reach—that optimal zone in which they are challenged in perfect proportion to their skills and capacities for growth and expansion. Given regular opportunities to apply course correction, more people can soar in the workplace, reaching new heights of accomplishments, fulfillment, and satisfaction.

(NEED TO UPDATE?) Professional speaker, author and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients a decade of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions.
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Sidebar

Six Qualities of Effective Feedback:

1. Intended to help, not to control or manipulate.
2. Delivered in the moment – or ASAP.
3. Presumes innocence without attributing negative motives.
4. Describes versus judges observed behaviours and impact.
5. Aimed to build trust and respect—authentic, candid and compassionate.

6. Stimulates mutual learning and inspired action.

Pullquote: “the feedback loop is used for the purpose of creating mutual learning”