CENTRE FOR COACHING
IN ORGANISATIONS

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A systemic approach to feedback coaching

"From a systems thinking point of view, psychometric instruments tend to be blind to the unique relational system the individual being measured exists within."

Marc Kahn

The term '360 feedback' emerged in the late nineties since when the vast majority of organizations have adopted the use of multi-rater tools. Despite their widespread use, there is little conclusive evidence as to their value and some coaches avoid them entirely. Recent research suggests such tools can be useful if used thoughtfully.

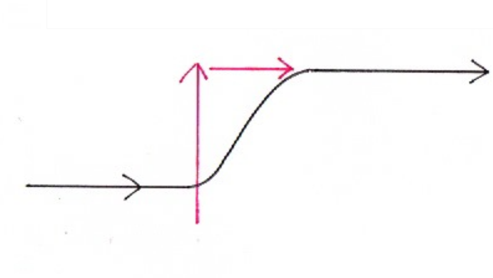
Two paradigms

There exist two basic paradigms in the world of organizational development.

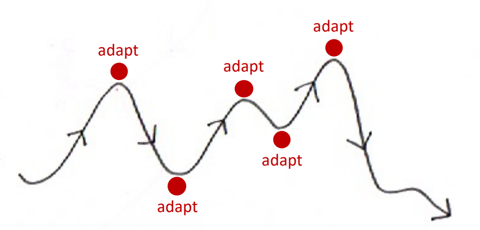
Traditional - leader as hero
The first paradigm regards leadership as an individual sport. It is assumed that if you succeed in training/coaching each and every leader in your organization, then you will achieve high levels of performance. Leadership is defined in generic terms, with everyone encouraged to aspire to a single set of competencies. The objective of development programs, including feedback programs, is to facilitate an intense burst of development, once every year or two.

Systemic - leadership as social adaptation
The second paradigm is adaptive. People's mental models as to what constitutes great leadership are constantly changing and evolving, based on experience and the sense they make of those experiences in dialogue with others. Moreover, how we best show up as leader depends on context. How many leaders have you worked with who have encountered problems with their leadership styles in moving from one organization to another, or who appear to be effective working with some stakeholders but not with others?

Leaders working in an ever-changing complex system need a constant, ceaseless, regular flow of feedback if they are to be most effective.



Development (& feedback) as periodic process



Development (& feedback) as ongoing process

Feedback is essential

Whichever your paradigm, feedback is essential. Organisations subscribing to the traditional paradigm often frame feedback as an annual process, a periodic effort to help people become better leaders as defined in generic terms. Organisations that subscribe to the systemic paradigm recognize the failings of this approach. They know that leaders working in an ever-changing complex system need a constant, ceaseless, regular flow of feedback if they are to be most effective. But feedback is hard to source unless everyone in the organization is comfortable asking for and receiving feedback, which is why some organisations seek to build feedback cultures. Some organisations see periodic feedback programs as a blocker toward enabling feedback cultures. If everyone knows that everyone else will be undertaking a 360 feedback exercise every year, it takes the onus off providing feedback on an ongoing basis, so goes the thinking.

Feedback programs can be useful

Although traditionally designed feedback programs often yield little value, we think they can be useful if debriefed from a systemic perspective and if the process encourages participants to engage in dialogue with others. The real value lies in helping participants to build trusting relationships as part of the program, through which they will have access to regular, ongoing feedback in the future. Designing such programs requires considering a few key questions.

1. What is the purpose of this program?

The purpose of feedback programs is usually expressed in terms of helping people to become better leaders. That purpose however, may be empowering and systemic or it may be essentially coercive. The coercive agenda starts with the premise that every leader ought seek to achieve a ‘perfect profile’ as determined by the underlying philosophy of the tool being used. The coach is expected to make sure that participants understand what that perfect profile is, *Systemic coaches know that feedback is never objective.*

and to take steps toward conforming with it. Such programs may provide coach and coachee with just one or two sessions, time enough for the coachee to understand what ideal leadership looks like and to come up with a plan to close the gap between their ratings and that profile. The more systemic and empowering approach recognizes the role of the coach in helping the coachee make their own sense of the data. Such programs usually comprise at least three sessions, providing the coachee with a reflective space to move from data, to sense-making, to action. Establishing the underlying purpose of a program is essential in being able to answer these next few questions.

2. What is my plan?

In planning a feedback process, the program designer must make some important decisions. Including:

What tool should I use?
We can evaluate tools according to various criteria – reliability and validity, for example, but we ought also think about what tool to use with reference to what we are trying to achieve and the culture of the organisation. Choosing a tool that has high norms and privileges strong performance management may not be the best tool to use if people in your organisation are not used to receiving feedback and you are attempting to encourage higher levels of collaboration.

There are also some general design aspects to look out for. Traditional coaches may dissuade participants from thinking about who provided what feedback. The tool is positioned as an objective device, best regarded as a reflection of our essential self. Systemic coaches know that feedback is never objective. Raters are often influenced by the extent to which they like or dislike a person, for example (halo-effects). They tend to stereotype - beware if you're over 50. Raters are not always able to recall the past accurately, unless they've just had an argument with the person they are rating! You may get a lower rating if yours is the fifth feedback request the rater received this week.

Feedback is also contextual. For example, I may find my propensity for plain speaking is much appreciated by one group of raters, who trust my intentions and value my capacity to give them clear direction. Those same behaviours are decried by another group of raters, who value harmony and accord. We therefore like tools that provide:

- **Sub-ratings**, separating out different rater populations. Often line managers rate differently to peers, who rate differently to direct reports, for example. Sub-ratings help coachees to understand that not everyone experiences them in the same way, that different people in different contexts will make different demands on them.

If you really want your program to fly, then consider briefing at least three stakeholder groups.

- **Verbatims**. Some coaches warn participants to just focus on the numbers and to focus on developing that generic skill. We encourage participants to make full use of the verbatim comments, to come up with detailed hypotheses as to what meaning is represented, and to go test those hypotheses by talking to people (respectfully of course).

What coaches should I use?

The systemic organization should deploy systemic coaches. Systemic coaches don't only adopt a different approach to debriefing, but they also add value over and above the feedback process itself. They are keen to share their experience of the process (while respecting confidentiality boundaries) recognising the value they can add in helping the organization gain greater insight into its own way of working.

When should we survey?

You don't have to think systemically to recognize that people don't like receiving lots of feedback requests at once, and that people don't like receiving feedback requests at all at the busiest times of year. So best to avoid financial year-end and the run up to the annual sales conference. Furthermore, recognise that if you survey around performance-review season (if you still have a performance-review season), then people will tend to rate others more kindly. Etc …

Who should we invite to do the rating?

The traditional approach assumes that people tend to behave the same way in all contexts. The emphasis is therefore on making sure we get a good mix of generous raters and less generous raters. Participants are encouraged to invite people who they don't get along with. The systemic approach recognizes that people behave differently in different contexts, and encourages the coachee to think about which contexts are most important to them. Context then drives rater selection. The systemic coach also recognizes that people don't invest energies in changing their behavior to please people they don't respect. There really isn't much point in twisting people's arms to choose people whose views they will quickly dismiss.

How will we brief participants?

If you really want your program to fly, then consider briefing at least three stakeholder groups. It's surprising how often **participants** don't fully understand why they're being asked to undertake feedback. Emails may get lost in the traffic (I coached someone recently with 22,000 emails in his inbox). So investing time in face-to-face briefings is usually worthwhile. Few people brief raters and line managers, but such briefings add value. Help **raters** understand what participants are hoping to get from the program. Help them

We recommend coach and coachee have at least three sessions together.

understand how rushing through a questionnaire, marking down the middle, may result in low ratings if the data is normed. Help them understand how to write useful verbatim comments. **Line managers** are even more important. We've worked with line managers who've told us they don't want intrude on what they see as a private process, but line managers have a key role to play; in helping participants to make sense of their feedback, helping them form clear intentions, providing feedback, and otherwise playing a supportive role. Leadership is a team sport.

3. How many feedback sessions?

Based on research we conducted in 2014 and 2015, we recommend coach and coachee have at least three sessions together. In the first session the role of the coach is to explain the data. Thereafter the coach's job is to help the coachee make sense of the data. This is a process that can't be hurried. We all have pre-existing identities, the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, including who we are as leaders. Unless we're in the habit of soliciting frequent regular feedback, some of the feedback we receive may not resonate with that identity, that story. We're unlikely to abandon our stories willy-nilly based on one round of feedback, nor should we. Feedback is subjective and contextual. Coachees usually require time to make sense of the data, and we encourage them to discuss their results with people who they trust as part of that process. Only once people have fully integrated their feedback will they be truly ready to come up with actions that they will then follow up on.

We've worked on programs where the coachee gets just the one briefing session – an explanation of the data. Most often those reports just end up in a drawer, soon forgotten. We've worked on programs where coach and coachee are asked to work through all three stages on one session. Often the coachee is asked to fill in a form with agreed goals at the end of the conversation. Those goals usually don't get actioned.

More impactful still is three-way feedback-by-interview, in which the coach prepares feedback givers to provide the coachee with feedback direct, with the coach present to facilitate.

Now innovate!

Online feedback instruments are useful when used purposefully, when participants succeed in coming up with clear intentions and contract with people to provide them with ongoing feedback as part of that process. We encourage coachees to build relationships during the feedback process and to leverage those relationships moving forward, so they have access to regular ongoing feedback in their attempts to address complex issues. But online feedback is not the only form of feedback available to you.

Some coaches are familiar with feedback-by-interview, a process in which the coach personally interviews stakeholders before summarizing findings to the coachee without breaching confidentiality. A key benefit of this process is that the coach can help the coachee to really understand the underlying intent of those giving feedback. More impactful still is three-way feedback-by-interview, in which the coach prepares feedback givers to provide the coachee with feedback direct, with the coach present to facilitate. This is a process that requires some setting up, but is the most effective of all in establishing ongoing feedback channels – so crucial for today's leaders.

Whatever approach you decide to use, we recommend you make time to reflect and learn, continuing to refine your programs so they work best for those working in your organisation.

Paul Lawrence
Principal, Centre for Coaching in Organisations

paul@ccorgs.com.au

For more information, ask Paul for a copy of:

Lawrence, P. (2015) A best practice model for the effective deployment of 360° feedback, *Development and Learning in Organizations: An International Journal, 29(6)*, pp. 13-16