FEEDBACK WRAPS
&
UNLIMITED VACATION

> Idealism increases in direct proportion to one's distance from the problem.
>
> **John Galsworthy,
> English novelist
> (1867–1933)**

More and more employees enjoy freedom in their choice of working hours, work places, and vacation days, while some even have complete freedom in a trust-only work environment. This means face-time between coworkers happens less often and we must learn to give each other constructive feedback in a way that is fast, easy, and… written.

The first time I became a manager at a small company I wondered about a number of things beyond just the size of my monthly salary. I wondered about the size of my end-of-year bonus, the size of my office corner, and how many vacation days I should negotiate with the business owners. One of them said to me, "Why should I care how long you are away from the office? I just want to see a profit at the end of the year." I remember feeling thrilled at the freedom, trust, and responsibility I was given. After my studies, which were all about achieving results no matter if I showed up in class or not, this was my first *trust-only* work environment.

Contrast that with the experience I had several years later at another company that had a time clock. All employees were expected to check in and check out at the start and at the end of every day. Proof that this clocked time was actually monitored came when the financial controller reprimanded me one day for "working" only 7 hours and 25 minutes the day before. Apparently it didn't matter that I had clocked at least 9 hours on other days. This is a clear example of a *time-driven* or presence-driven work environment.

You won't be surprised when I say I preferred the former to the latter.

Flextime

The reason I was at the office for only 7 hours and 25 minutes on that particular day was because I had an appointment with the dentist, whose opening hours were almost as narrow as our financial controller's mind. But compared to other workers, I suffered only a minor inconvenience.

Many employees have to juggle the challenges of dropping off and picking up their kids from school or day care, attending to their parents at an elderly home, visiting the hospital to see a loved one, attending yoga classes, learning a foreign language, evading or suffering traffic jams, working out at the gym, walking the dog, donating blood, or doing charity work. [Javitch, "The Benefits of Flextime"] It makes you wonder, if we want half the world to work from nine to five, shouldn't the other half be working from five in the afternoon to nine in the morning?

Dividing the world into two groups of people (those who work "normal" hours and those who don't) is clearly unrealistic. That's why many organizations have introduced a **flextime policy**. 🕙 Such a policy often defines a core time slot when everyone is expected to be at the office, while allowing flexibility for the other hours. Under this policy, employees can easily compensate for their 7 hours and 25 minutes on one day by ~~working~~ showing up at the office for 8 hours and 35 minutes on another day (often called *compensation time*).

It was a first step toward a more trust-driven work environment, which also meant a first step toward performance evaluations based on effort and results, not on time.
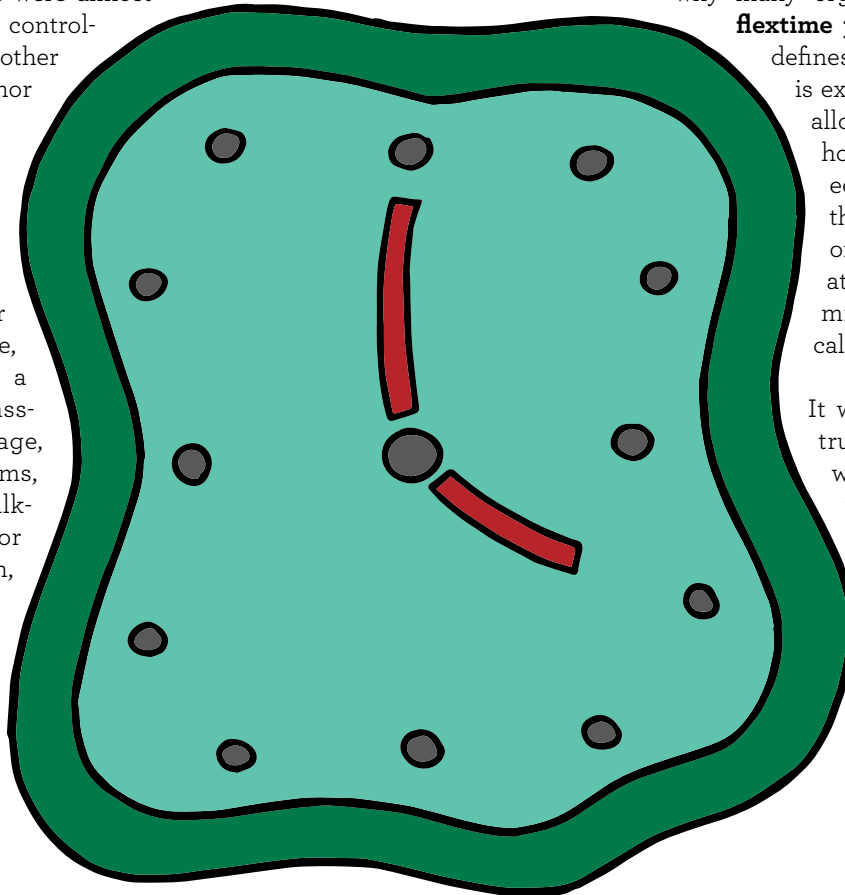
Remote Working

Fortunately, the "flexibilization" of work environments didn't stop there. In a number of organizations, employees are allowed to do part of their work at home, in remote co-working offices, while traveling abroad, at the day care center, or at the local Starbucks. A **telecommuting policy** allows people to do their work where it makes the most sense for them, given their personal circumstances and the nature of their work. Multiple reports have indicated increased morale, better focus, higher productivity, reduced turnover, and lower expenses in environments with a flexible attitude toward the location of work. [Boag, "Benefits and Challenges of Remote Working"; Surowiecki, "Face Time"] Also, such organizations tend to draw more-experienced, high-quality workers who prefer to work wherever they want.

Not unexpectedly, allowing people to do their work anywhere creates a bucket load of new challenges. What about privacy, security, and confidentiality? What about people's equipment, insurance, and travel expenses? [Elliott, "4 Important Considerations for Creating a Remote Work Policy"] Most organizations feel the need to develop a remote working policy that clearly defines people's rights and responsibilities when they are working away from the office.

And then there are other issues. When people work on their own as telecommuters, there is an increased risk of loss of trust, collaboration, and social cohesion. [McGregor, "Flextime"; Surowiecki, "Face Time"] In other words, the organization may risk losing a healthy culture. [Hauser, "What's Wrong with a No-Remote-Work Policy?"] It's no coincidence that even the hippest and trendiest Silicon Valley companies often spend large sums of money on free food, games, massages, and fitness equipment in order to keep everyone together in the same office as much as possible.

Still, the option of doing useful work while away from the office seems like a second step toward a more trust-driven work environment. And it is also a second step toward feedback systems focusing on *how* people do their work, not on *where* they work.

Unlimited Vacation

We can even go another step further in making our work environments more flexible. Ever since people have worked away from the office, the line between work time and free time has started to blur. When an employee books a vacation from her office desk, should that be considered as the first hour of her vacation time? And when the same person phones into an important meeting from her holiday resort, does that count as two missed hours of vacation? [MacMillan, "Companies Offer Unlimited Vacation"] What about writing a report while babysitting the neighbors' kids? What about walking the dog after lunch while discussing a project with a team member?

Smart organizations would rather not specify in detail what is and what is not allowed during specific times of the day, as long as people do enough useful work *and* take enough time off. Plenty of studies have found that time away from work, with regular vacations, improves people's performance and lowers their stress levels which increases the quality of their output when they *do* work. [Bailyn, "Unlimited Vacation Time"]

> Time away from work,
> with regular vacations,
> improves people's performance.

For this reason, companies such as The Motley Fool, Netflix, HubSpot, Evernote, and Zynga have stopped defining how many hours per day people should work and how many days in the year they can go on a vacation. [McConnell and McPike, "Unlimited Vacation?"] The benefits of such an **unlimited vacation policy** are

similar to the ones I mentioned earlier: better morale, increased productivity, higher retention, and higher engagement [McConnell and McPike, "Unlimited Vacation?"]. And no tiresome discussions about banking vacation days, half days, bonus days, and other nonsense.

Surprisingly enough, with an unlimited number of vacation days and without any guidance on *how much* vacation per year is reasonable, it appears some people actually take less time off than they should. The reasons mentioned most often are not wanting to be characterized as a "slacker", not having the experience or courage to say "No" to extra work, and not being able to choose (also called "choice overload"). [Bailyn, "Unlimited Vacation Time"; Gregoire, "Unlimited Vacation Policies"] Taking into account these undesirable side effects of an unlimited vacation policy, some companies are strongly suggesting a *minimum* amount of vacation per employee, but no maximum. [McGregor, "Unlimited Vacation Policy"] (This also happens to be the law in many countries.)

Assuming that we can properly address these side-effects, the responsibility for one's own free time sounds to me like a third step toward a more trust-driven work environment. At the same time, it is a third step toward performance feedback that must be based on actual work *performance* instead of work *presence*.

Results-Only Work Environments

Flextime Policy, Remote Working Policy, Unlimited Vacation Time Policy, Casual Friday Policy, Open Door Policy.... You know there's a problem when the word "policy" is needed to manage work in a sensible way. How about having *no* policies instead?

> **"There is also no clothing policy at Netflix, but no one comes to work naked," says the company handbook. "Lesson: you don't need policies for everything."**
>
> **McConnell and McPike, "Unlimited Vacation?"**

I wrote a significant part of this book while traveling across the world. Actually, sometimes I was just *trying* to travel. Just last week, my flight to Hamburg was canceled two times, and thus I spent a whole day at the Vienna airport reading articles, answering emails, planning workshops, sending invoices, and writing blog posts. The coffee was good, the Wi-Fi was great, and the chairs were comfortable. I had a perfect office. To my surprise, some people on the Internet asked me, "Why are you staying at the airport? Why don't you go sightseeing in Vienna?" And I thought, "Excuse me? Why do you stay at your office? Why don't you go home to spend time with your family?"

Strange as it may sound, like many other people, I have work to do. But unlike some other people, I can do most of my work anywhere. The whole world is my office. The suggestion that I could spend a day sightseeing reflects the thought, "Jurgen is not at an office; therefore, he is probably not working. He could use his free time to relax and find himself a delicious chocolate-heavy Sachertorte." It seems to me an expression of the notion that office work is normal and remote work is different. It's time to change that.

> **Remote work insinuates that we're away from something, a physical location where work should be done. [...] Words to remove from your vocabulary if you're serious about moving into the twenty-first century include the following: flex worker, teleworker, remote worker, virtual worker, mobile worker, telecommuter [...] The insinuation that comes with the labeling is that they are doing something different from what they're supposed to be doing.**
>
> **Ressler and Thompson,**
> ***Why Managing Sucks* loc:445**

> I'm not a remote worker because I'm not away from anything where I'm supposed to be.

I'm not a remote worker because I'm not *away* from anything where I'm supposed to be. (OK, I was supposed to be in Hamburg at some point, but that was just for a few hours.) My work is always with me. I think the same applies to other creative networkers.

Work isn't a place you go; rather it's something you do.

Ressler and Thompson, *Why Managing Sucks* loc:445

When we focus on results, we don't need office policies. A popular example of a **no-policy policy** is the concept of the Results-Only Work Environment (or ROWE). It basically says, trust people to get the work done and measure performance by looking at output, not input. [Ressler and Thompson, *Why Managing Sucks* loc:1519] In a ROWE, people can work anywhere they want. It's the results that matter, not the method. There is anecdotal evidence that both output and engagement have increased when organizations have switched to a ROWE. [Belkin, "Time Wasted?"] This is no surprise. A Results-Only Work Environment implements what many studies have indicated to be the most effective way to manage an organization.

Like any other good idea, ROWE has its share of problems and critics. Some people (employees and critics alike) have confused the Results-Only Work Environment with a Remote-Only Work Environment, pointing out that some jobs and work environments require people to handle customers (in retail) or patients (in hospitals), which is work that can't easily be done remotely. [Haun, "Why ROWE Hasn't Quite Caught On Yet"] It's a strange argument because the idea is to

> **Help employees understand what needs to be done, give them the autonomy, trust and support to accomplish objectives in the ways that work best for them, and provide feedback and recognition to let them know how well they're doing and reinforce good performance.**

Valcour, "The End of 'Results Only'"

focus on *creating results*, not on *staying away*. If good results require employees to discuss among each other who will be at the store or the hospital, and at which times, to take care of customers or patients properly, then this is exactly what should happen in a ROWE. A failure of people to take joint responsibility for results is not a failure of ROWE; it is a failure of company culture and personal attitude. [Haun, "Why ROWE Hasn't Quite Caught On Yet"]

Other authors have claimed that a Results-Only Work Environment fails when company survival is at stake and that a sense of "all hands on deck" is needed. [Hollon, "Goodbye ROWE"] Again, the same conclusion applies here. If the crucial *outcome* is survival of the company, then *that* is the result the employees should be aiming for together. Indeed, they might have a better chance at survival with intensive face-to-face collaboration at the office, and it could be a sign of bad culture and attitude when employees don't come to this realization by themselves and instead prefer to save the business from their own separate but comfortable homes. On the other hand, when people can't be bothered to show up at the office, one might also conclude that it's the company culture (not ROWE) that simply isn't worth saving.

Developing Trust

"Trust people to get the work done."

Oh. Really?

Few topics are as widely misunderstood as trust. Everyone talks about it, but when I ask for clarification, nobody can properly define it. They all claim employees have a right to be trusted, but few are willing to trust a co-worker to successfully perform open-heart surgery, build a rocket, or win the Olympics.

Trust is a rather complex topic. The model of trust that I trust most lists ten factors that all contribute to the presence (or lack) of trust. [Hurley, *The Decision to Trust* loc:616]

Growing trust involves quite a bit more than "just relying on everyone to get the job done". Not everyone knows *how* to do a certain job (Capability). This makes people uncomfortable with a limitless amount of freedom for themselves *and* for others (Risk Tolerance), which actually feeds their *distrust* of a results-only work environment, which worsens their collaboration (Communication), which further breaks down trust, which nudges authoritative managers to "take action" and call everyone back to the office (Power), which destroys another chunk of trust, which stops people from delivering on commitment (Integrity), which evaporates the last bit of trust people still had. And that's just one possible outcome of a laissez-faire approach to a results-only work environment.

- **Risk Tolerance**
  some people are risk takers, others are cautious;

- **Adjustment**
  some people are optimists, others are pessimists;

- **Power**
  some people have authority, others suffer from it;

- **Security**
  sometimes the stakes are high, sometimes they're low;

- **Similarities**
  some people are similar to each other, others aren't;

- **Interests**
  sometimes interests are aligned, sometimes they aren't;

- **Benevolent Concern**
  some are nice to us, others... not so much;

- **Capability**
  some know what they're doing, others... not really;

- **Integrity**
  some people deliver on commitment, others... forget it;

- **Communication**
  some can communicate well, some... —uhm.

Trust is like money.
It can take years to earn it
and it takes only minutes to lose it.

> **There is no better way to build cross-group trust and offset initial skepticism than to establish a strong track record of delivering on commitments.**
>
> *Hurley, The Decision to Trust loc:3175*

As an alternative, the spiral of trust could move upward. By allowing those with a *track record of delivering on commitment* (Integrity) to work from home, you grow more trust in remote working, which reduces a manager's urge to "take action" (Power), which generates more trust among everyone that they can indeed self-organize, which helps them to collaborate better (Communication), which creates yet more trust, which helps even the most risk-averse people (Risk Tolerance) to see the benefits of a results-only work environment. The spiral continues until employees have earned freedoms they never had before, and can do work in ways they never thought possible (Capability).

Human organizations are complex systems. We can imagine many other vicious and virtuous cycles of trust, using any combination of the ten trust factors. However, many authors believe that growing trust by focusing first on commitment (Integrity) is a good bet.

Developing a track record of commitment and trust might take a lot of time and effort. Trust is like money. It can take years to earn it and it takes only minutes to lose it. Authoritative managers who communicate (intentionally or not) that nobody in the office can be trusted to set their own time schedule, choose their own work place, and select their own vacation days, do not develop trust. They merely *add* to the distrust that is already there in the organization's culture. [Valcour, "The End of 'Results Only'"] You may wonder at the long-term effects of such a message on performance and retention, but many experts already know. [Peterson, "Cutting ROWE Won't Cure Best Buy"]

On the other hand, I agree that merely trusting everyone, no questions asked and no strings attached, will often have the same results. Instead, you should start with the premise that trust (maybe not in your Interests, Similarities, or Benevolent Concerns, but in your Capabilities, Integrity, and Communication) needs to be established first *before* you can do whatever you want. A focus on results not only follows but also precedes unlimited freedoms. [Daniels, "Results Only Work Environment?"] It appears that a results-only work environment is a right that has to be *earned*. [Gregusson, "Creating a Remote Work Policy"]

Instead of focusing on results, I believe creative workers should focus on trust first. They should learn that trust is grown by delivering on commitments, communicating often and well, aligning interests, showing benevolent concern, etc. When trust is established *first*, it is much easier to discuss and evaluate results *later*. Expecting trust to emerge automatically when just evaluating results is naïve and short-sighted. That's why I prefer to talk about a **trust-only work environment.** When there is trust first, there will be results later. Create a trust-only work environment *before* a results-only work environment. Trust me.

Developing a work environment in which we trust people to get their work done also implies developing a work environment in which we can give feedback about that work. We saw that the steps toward giving workers more freedom by removing the focus on *where* they work, have also increased the need for evaluation about *how* they work. When work is something people *do*, not a place where they go, then feedback should also be targeted at what they do, not where they are.

When there is trust first,
there will be results later.

Performance Appraisals

As soon as managers think about the possibility of switching from a time-only or presence-only work environment to a results-only or trust-only work environment, the first question that usually pops up is: "How do we evaluate results?" After all, a fair consideration is, "If we are not supposed to measure the *input* (the amount of time someone is present at the office) we need to measure the *output* (the actual results produced) or else we won't know why we are paying that person a salary." And then they create yet another policy.

> **In policies, we see at-will agreements and elaborate rules of conduct (so we can fire you easily when you screw up), elaborate policy manuals (we're in control and you're not a responsible adult), time clocks and leave approval slips (we don't trust you), attendance awards and incentive pay (you really don't like to work), suggestion programs ("If you have an idea, put it in a box"), and, of course [...], the sacred cow, the Godzilla of them all—yes, the performance appraisal.**
>
> **Coens and Jenkins,**
> ***Abolishing Performance Appraisals* loc:779**

Traditionally, most businesses use a formal process involving **performance appraisals** as the main (or sometimes only) way of "evaluating" the performance of employees. The performance appraisal is described as a mandated process in which, for a period of time (often annually), an employee's work performance, behaviors, and/or traits are rated, judged, and/or described by someone other than the rated employee, and documented records are kept by the organization. [Coens and Jenkins, *Abolishing Performance Appraisals* loc:402] Managers and HR professionals believe they need this process in order to:

1. Help employees improve their performance;

2. Motivate employees with coaching and counseling;

3. Enhance communication with valuable feedback;

4. Find a fair way to distribute compensation;

5. Have useful data for promotions and staffing decisions;

6. Collect a paper trail in case they need to fire someone.

Second only to firing employees, managers hate performance appraisals the most.

Regrettably, the practice doesn't work. Performance appraisals have a terrible track record. [Coens and Jenkins, *Abolishing Performance Appraisals* loc:457] While most companies appear to use them, a great majority of people find them completely useless and often counterproductive. [Jozwiak, "Is It Time to Give Up on Performance Appraisals?"] A significant body of research confirms that performance appraisals usually destroy intrinsic motivation and team collaboration. [Kohn, Punished by Rewards loc:3568] This typically stressful annual ritual of appraisals almost always fails for a number of reasons: the employee and manager have opposite mindsets; pay often has nothing to do with performance; no manager can ever be objective; the performance checklists are too generic; the evaluations create distrust; and individual evaluations destroy teamwork. [Bersin, "Time to Scrap Performance Appraisals?"; Culbert, "Get Rid of the Performance Review!"; Vozza, "Scrap Year-End Performance Reviews"] Many managers seem to have at least an idea that something's wrong because, second only to firing employees, they hate performance appraisals the most. [Williams, "Why 'Constructive Feedback' Doesn't Improve Performance"]

Nobody has been able to supply evidence that appraisals will help organizations improve their performance in the long term. Most managers and HR professionals just take them for granted without truly thinking about their many hidden assumptions. [Coens and Jenkins, *Abolishing Performance Appraisals* loc:769] If performance appraisals were themselves subject to a performance appraisal, they would be fired on the spot for complete lack of any concrete results. Worst of all, they reinforce the hierarchy that modern organizations should try to get rid of.

> **Performance appraisal has become more than a management tool. It has grown into a cultural, almost anthropological symbol of the parental, boss–subordinate relationship that is characteristic of patriarchal organizations.**
>
> **Coens and Jenkins,**
> ***Abolishing Performance Appraisals* loc:72**

Fortunately, the world is slowly waking up. One by one, both small *and* big organizations are getting rid of performance appraisals. [Bersin, "Time to Scrap Performance Appraisals?"] One main reason is that the practice is unsustainable in the light of the emerging globalized creative economy. Remote working, contract workers, Agile and Lean methods, and many other trends make it more and more difficult to organize formal performance evaluations between "superiors" and their "subordinates". (Case in point: my spouse hasn't had any recent performance appraisals because he's always away from the head office!) Better to get rid of this useless ritual completely and replace appraisals with something that makes more sense in the 21st century.

So, what *should* we do?

I believe the first thing we must learn is how to offer *written* feedback to our colleagues in an easy, honest, and *friendly* way. I would like to emphasize friendly because research shows that a "treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen" approach undermines morale and motivation in organizations, which destroys collaboration between employees as well as their performance. [Baer, "Why Jerk Bosses Make People Worse at Their Jobs"] It sounds obvious, but, sadly, it seems necessary to remind managers of this fact. When feedback is honest, however, research shows that engagement goes up. [Ashkenas, "Stop Pretending That You Can't Give Candid Feedback"]

With more and more employees working remotely instead of at a central office, we need a way to provide frequent, honest, and friendly feedback on each other's work via email and other online tools instead of only relying on face-to-face conversations. We cannot wait with our evaluation of someone's new design, report, software app, or quality process until the next time we happen to run into them at the office. (That could take a while!) Considering they don't want us to monitor their working times, work places, and vacation days, creative networkers have a right to receive useful feedback on their results and they need it *fast*. Feedback needs to be part of our work every day. Feedback should be *normal*. [Batista, "Building a Feedback-Rich Culture"]

> Creative networkers have a right to receive useful feedback on their results and they need it <u>fast.</u>

Step 1:
Describe Your Context

The purpose of feedback is to help people improve their work. [Tugend, "You've Been Doing a Fantastic Job"] It is crucial to realize that your goal is not to make them feel good about themselves. Your goal is to make them feel good about your feedback. When people appreciate constructive feedback, you increase the chance that they will act on it. [Kaufman, "Giving Good Constructive Feedback"]
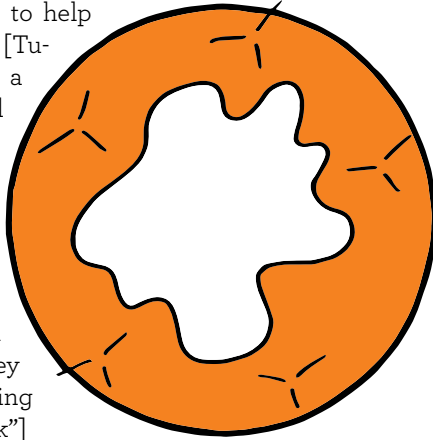
As a first step, it is useful to start any attempt at giving feedback by describing your context. ✦ Briefly mention the environment you find yourself in, your state of mind, and the expectations and assumptions you have, which may all influence your evaluation in some way. [Tarng, "How to Give Constructive Design Feedback over Email"] For example, "I am reviewing the new website from my hotel room in Shanghai, feeling a bit tired after a long conference day, but I don't want to keep you waiting. I work with the assumption that the website I'm looking at is the beta version, which implements all features we discussed in the last sprint." Another example, "I'm giving you this feedback early in the morning, after a cup of tea and half a bottle of vitamin pills. I think I caught the flu! :-(I have the third draft of chapter 5 in front of me now, as a PDF on my Android tablet. I understand it still needs to be copy-edited."

By starting with a description of your personal situation, you enable the people on the receiving end to notice any similarities between them and you, which can generate trust. ("The flu? I feel sorry for you. My husband is suffering from it right now!" "In Shanghai? Cool, I was there last year!") You also allow them to appreciate your attempt at communicating well and they will better understand the context of your evaluation. Instead of "Your Twitter feed on the homepage doesn't work!" they will read "Your Twitter feed on the homepage doesn't seem to work from my hotel room in Shanghai!" This would allow them to correctly identify the Great Firewall as the source of the problem. (Yes, this is a real personal example.) And if you want to tell someone that her work looks horrible, this could be easier for her to accept when she knows her work sucked from the perspective of someone suffering a crappy Wi-Fi connection, an old smartphone, bad coffee, three screaming babies, and a terrible hangover. This allows the creative worker to keep believing her work actually looks great in her own safe environment, but offers the additional challenge of making it look good for someone in a less favorable context.

Step 2: List Your Observations

The purpose of the second step is to explain the things you observe, in terms of facts and experiences as if you have the eyes of a researcher. Do *not* give your opinion on what's wrong or right about the person's traits, knowledge, or professionalism. Only focus on the things you can actually see about her work or behaviors. [Gallo, "Giving a High Performer Productive Feedback"; Kaufman, "Giving Good Constructive Feedback"] Make sure that anything you report is a plain fact. It should be as if the feedback is coming from a scientist's mind and, therefore, hard to deny or ignore. By just listing plain observations instead of emotional outbursts, you communicate your competence, which adds to the generation of trust.

For example, the feedback "The Twitter stream on the home page doesn't work" can be easily dismissed with "It works fine on *my* computer". Instead, you could say, "Under the Twitter header on the home page, I see an empty gray box. I expected to see the three or four latest tweets from our corporate account." Whether things "work" or not is an interesting topic for a philosophical debate in a hotel bar. The *fact* is you are looking at an empty gray box. This cannot be denied, unless you have a track record of poor eyesight.
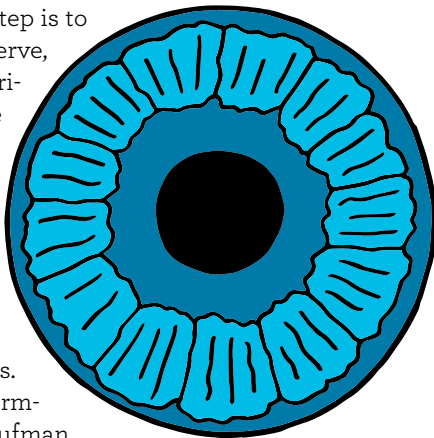
By keeping observations and facts separate from evaluations and judgments you can avoid unhelpful generalizations. The comment "Nothing you delivered has ever worked as promised" might *feel* true to you, but is less likely to inspire improvement than the comment "A cryptic error message (see attached) prevented me from accessing the application. It looked similar to the error message I reported last time and the time before." When you decouple observation from evaluation, you decrease the chance that people hear harsh, unfair criticism, and you increase the chance that they are willing to improve.

Do not fall into the trap of only pointing out things that are below expectations. You *must* also point out the things you noticed that are beyond what you expected. For example, "I was surprised to see the email address was validated in real-time." or "The joke in the first paragraph made me laugh unexpectedly, and I sprayed my cappuccino all over my notebook." Encouraging people to grow their strengths is not just useful for novices: even experts and top performers appreciate recognition of their talents every now and then. [Gallo, "Giving a High Performer Productive Feedback"; Kaufman, "Giving Good Constructive Feedback"] It also makes problems and issues easier to act on for those on the receiving end when they see there is a genuine appreciation for the things that were done well.

The result of step 2 should be an unsorted list of things you noticed while reviewing the work, both below and above expectations, as if you have been giving the commentary to a live sports event you had been eagerly waiting for.

Step 3:
Express Your Emotions

Now that you have your list of facts and observations it is time to evaluate the impact they had on you. Yes, feel free to get emotional! 😔

By expressing the emotions you felt when reviewing someone's work, it is easier to connect with the other person, and it can help you prevent or resolve conflict. You use it to express your benevolent concern for good results, which again adds to the growth of trust. For example, you can report that you felt *slight annoyance* when you saw no results in the Twitter box on the home page, and you felt *great amusement* at the joke in the first paragraph. The automatic email address validation made you feel *happy* at the competence level of your co-worker, while you felt *anger* when seeing the cryptic error message for the third time.

Don't be tempted to make assumptions about what *other* people might see or feel when reviewing the work. "No user will ever understand the icon on this button" is not good feedback because it expresses frustration. It is *not* a fact augmented with a feeling. A much better comment would be, "I saw a shower icon on the wall, but it took me a minute to understand that it was actually the light switch for the bathroom. It made me wonder if other users would make that connection more easily than I did." (Yes, being respectful often requires a few more words than responding like a prick would.) What is reported here is a misunderstanding (fact) and the expression of puzzlement (feeling). You can argue for hours about what other people might or might not understand, but nobody can deny your own observations and your own feelings. [Tarng, "How to Give Constructive Design Feedback over Email"]

If you want, you can emphasize the separation of facts and feelings by adding emoticons to the observations you reported in the previous step:

Observation	Feeling
"Under the Twitter header on the home page I see an empty grey box. I expected to see the three or four latest tweets from our corporate account."	:-/
"A cryptic error message (see attached) prevented me from accessing the application. It looked similar to the error message I reported last time, and the time before."	>:-(
"The joke in the first paragraph made me laugh unexpectedly, and I sprayed my cappuccino all over my notebook."	:-D
"I was surprised to see the email address was validated in real-time."	:-)
"I saw a shower icon on the wall but it took me a minute to understand it is actually the light switch for the bathroom. It makes me wonder if other users will make that connection more easily than I did."	((+_+))

Explicitly listing the words *annoyed, angry, laughing, happy,* and *confused* probably makes your report a bit easier to comprehend, but I think there's value in playfulness. Personally, I appreciate people being serious about not taking work *too* seriously. §8-)

Step 4:
Sort by Value

In the fourth step, you might find it useful to sort the observations by the value that you recognized in the work. 1¢ Usually, most of the things that resulted in a positive feeling will have a positive value for you, and the observations that led to a negative feeling will have a negative value. But it doesn't have to be that way! For example, someone could have made a hilarious mistake that made you laugh out loud (a positive emotion) but the embarrassing error must certainly be corrected (negative value). On the other hand, some other issue could have made you feel annoyed (a negative emotion), but maybe this helped you discover something crucial that would have cost you an arm and a leg if it had not been discovered early enough (positive value).

Assuming that people read your feedback from top to bottom, it will be helpful to put the most valuable observations at the top and the least valuable ones at the bottom. This makes sure people first learn how their work has *added* value for you; and only after that, they learn how their work has *subtracted* value. It seems like the equivalent of starting with compliments before dealing with criticism, though it is actually not the same thing.

In my opinion, it is misleading to talk about "positive feedback" (compliments) versus "negative feedback" (criticism). As we've seen, your *feelings* can be described as positive or negative, and the *value* of what you observed can also be positive or negative. But your feelings about discovering negative value can be positive, and vice versa. Therefore, your feedback as a whole should be called neither positive nor negative. [Tugend, "You've Been Doing a Fantastic Job"] It is merely a list of factual observations, positive/negative emotions, and positive/negative value. The end result communicates that your interests are aligned with the other person's interests, and this creates more trust.

Step 5:
End with Suggestions

OK, it's time to wrap up! You've spent some time describing your context, listing your observations, expressing your feelings, and sorting items by value. Now it is time to end your feedback on a high note. You can do that by offering a couple of helpful suggestions.
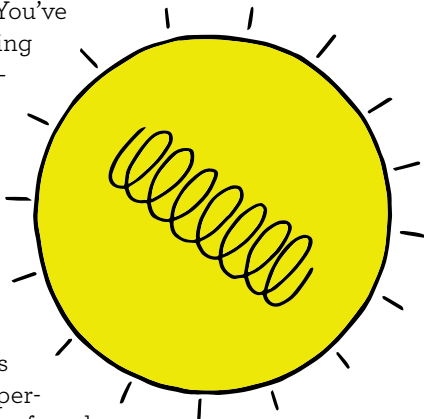
Assume that everyone wants to do well. If people don't perform well, the fault should be found in the system around people that is preventing them from doing a great job. [Bersin, "Time to Scrap Performance Appraisals?"] Therefore, any evaluations of performance should reveal systemic problems, not personal failure. Your suggestions for improvement should reflect that mindset. For example, you could end with, "If you find this useful, I would love to help review the design process. Maybe we can discover why some error messages keep occurring." Or you could say, "If you want me or other people to test the Twitter box on other computers and other browsers, let me know." Or you could make an offer such as, "I attached some examples of icons that you might find helpful. They are just sketches, of course."

Remember that your suggestions are… just your suggestions. [Kaufman, "Giving Good Constructive Feedback"] Professional creative workers may disagree with you. That's why we call them professionals and creatives. But when you practice the separation of facts from feelings, and feelings from value, and you learn to wrap your report inside a context, spiced up with some suggestions, I'm sure most creative workers will be delighted with your approach to giving feedback.

It is said that experts usually look for things to improve, while novices usually look for confirmation that they're doing well. [Grant Halvorson, "Sometimes Negative Feedback is Best"] With the method described here, you can serve both groups. In fact, you don't even need to know if someone is an expert, a novice, or anything in between. What you offer are observations, feelings, and value. It is up to them to decide how to consume your healthy feedback wrap. What they will certainly appreciate is that you can deliver a feedback wrap fast, which communicates integrity and commitment, the first and foremost prerequisites for trust.

The Praise Sandwich

One well-known method for constructive feedback is called the "praise sandwich". It suggests that any criticism should be wrapped between positive comments before and after the criticism. [Kaufman, "Giving Good Constructive Feedback"]

However, many authors have problems with the praise sandwich. Some claim that people hear only the positive parts of the praise sandwich, and tend to ignore the bad stuff offered between the compliments. [Tugend, "You've Been Doing a Fantastic Job"] Other authors claim the opposite, saying that human brains are wired to respond to negative information, meaning that they ignore the compliments. [Williams, "Why 'Constructive Feedback' Doesn't Improve Performance"]

I believe both are true, depending on who is listening (or reading). Research confirms that novices prefer support and confirmation while experts prefer honesty and valuable information. [Grant Halvorson, "Sometimes Negative Feedback is Best"] Therefore, a novice who feels insecure about his capabilities may seek confirmation that he is doing a good job, and might only pick up the compliments. An expert who desires an honest evaluation, however, has a focus only on the criticism, and she may dismiss the compliments in the praise sandwich as insincere flattery.

Written Feedback

With employees and other creative workers continuously moving between projects, working both inside and outside the office, and enjoying free time and vacations whenever they think they can, it is crucial for employers and coworkers alike to develop the capability of giving and receiving honest constructive feedback on results. Trust-only work environments should be feedback-rich. [Bersin, "Time to Scrap Performance Appraisals?"] This means there should be frequent feedback about the same products and processes from different people. [Gregusson, "Creating a Remote Work Policy"]

In Agile software development communities, when the release of a product is painful and time-consuming, if is often said it should be done *more often*, so that people are forced to learn how to make it painless and easy. With constructive feedback, it's the same. Traditionally, performance appraisals are done once a year in a big, painful, and time-consuming way. For a creative networker, the challenge should be clear. How can we give feedback *every day*? The feedback wrap will help you do exactly that. With a bit of experience, you can send a feedback wrap in less than 15 minutes. And a feedback wrap is also easy to *ask* for.

Obviously, because this is all about *written* feedback, your words must be picked carefully. Written language must often be softened with "maybe", "a little", and "it seems that". And what you cannot communicate in body language will have to be translated into respectful sentences. Never forget that, unlike face-to-face conversations, written conversations are easily retrieved and reproduced, sometimes long after you had forgotten about them. Assume all your email is read by the NSA, leaked to the press, analyzed by your enemies, and forwarded to your mother-in-law. In other words, write nicely.

Even then, you *still* have little control over other people's interpretations. But let's not pretend that people are any better at offering and receiving verbal feedback. I believe people's response to feedback, whether written or verbal, is mainly determined by their inner state of mind and any conflicts they have with themselves. When a person's thinking is dominated by self-criticism, regret, pride, or some other very common human mental state, her response to your feedback may be unexpected and may seem illogical. [Kashtan, "Is Nonviolent Communication Practical?"] No amount of tweaking of words, whether verbal or written, can prevent an outburst of being human.

And yet, though I am among the first to admit that face-to-face discussions are crucial in all human relationships, I am convinced that the health of such relationships can be improved significantly with respectful written feedback on each other's work in a trust-only work environment. Written feedback also helps you to keep proper documentation, to think more carefully about delicate issues, and to report on observations, feelings, and value in a well-balanced manner. And most important of all, feedback wraps can be delivered *fast* and *often*, and nobody needs to wait for scheduled face-to-face performance appraisals (which shouldn't happen anyway).

Assume all your email is read by the NSA,
leaked to the press,
analyzed by your enemies,
and forwarded to your mother-in-law.

This looks like Nonviolent Communication!

Nonviolent Communication lacks an explicit step for describing the context first, because the method is mainly practiced during face-to-face verbal conversations. The context is obvious when you're in the same room.

Indeed, it does. **Nonviolent Communication** suggests that, in any sensitive and emotional conversation with other people, it is best to begin offering your feedback by describing the *facts* you observe. This is followed by expressing the *feelings* these facts generate for you, followed by an expression of your needs or what would be valuable to you, and concluded with a request or suggestion for the other person. [Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*]

Because it is much easier to "count to ten" and "think before you act" when having a *written* conversation, I actually believe Nonviolent Communication could be more successful when *not* done face-to-face in the heat of an emotional discussion. [Appelo, "Nonviolent Communication (Stop It!)"] The feedback wrap could be the tool that enables Nonviolent Communication to earn the successes it has been deprived of in many real-time situations.

Wrapping Up

Among systems thinkers, it is well-known that 95 percent of the performance of an organization is the result of the whole system, not the individual people. It makes little sense to have performance appraisals with individual employees when most of their performance is the emergent result of the interactions between clients, tools, processes, and other parts of the environment over which they usually have little control. [Coens and Jenkins, *Abolishing Performance Appraisals* loc:925]
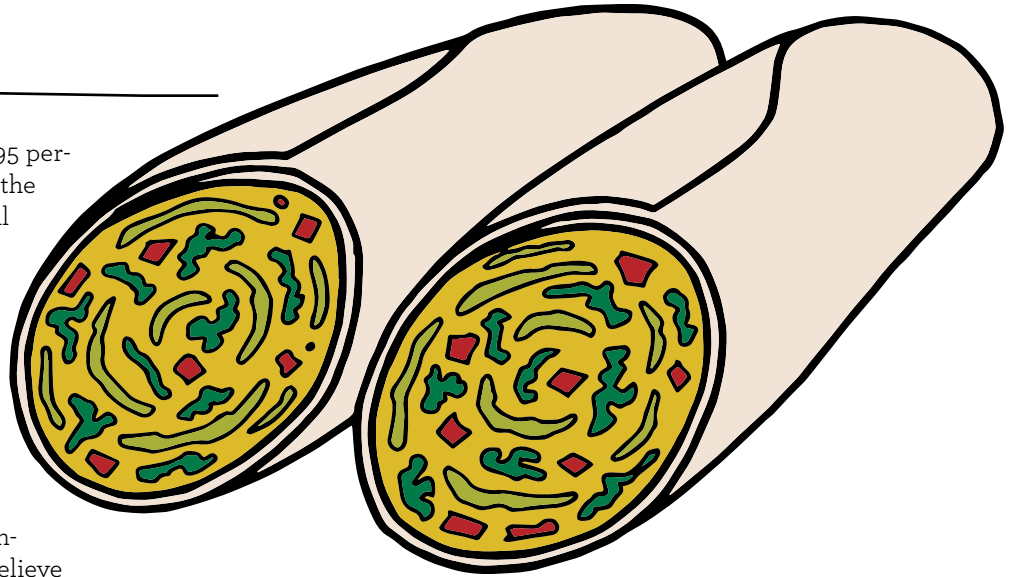
The concept of the Results-Only Work Environment is great where it promotes freedom, but I believe ROWE is somewhat flawed where it suggests a focus on goals, targets, and measurements. This might lead people to adopt a deterministic approach to performance management that has long ago been dismissed as unrealistic and unwise by the quality improvement movement and experts from Lean and Agile communities.

What organizations need is a *trust*-only work environment. By purposefully creating trust, people will be more eager to find and solve any performance issues. Who cares about the performance of individual parts when those parts are directly responsible for only 5 percent of the outcome? What you should care about is how the parts interact with each other, which includes how they give and receive feedback, because the other 95 percent of the performance in the system is found in the interaction among the parts!

The feedback wrap will help people focus on personal improvement *and* systemic improvement. At the same time, the practice generates trust through good communication, benevolent concern, aligning interests, increasing competence, and delivering on commitment. This growth of a *trust*-only work environment clears the path for a results-only work environment, where people can have flexible working hours, remote work places, and unlimited vacations, and, indeed, *maybe* some collective goals and targets.

Last, but *definitely* not least, I feel it's necessary to emphasize again that the feedback wrap can *never* replace face-to-face conversations, nor can it be an alternative for coaching and personal development. You still need to address those in other ways. But I'm sure this simple little practice grows trust among coworkers; it helps people improve the performance in the system; it motivates them with good communication and feedback; and it allows you to keep documented records of results, in case you ever need them. But I trust you won't.

Example

To: Jason Little
From: Jurgen Appelo
Subject: Feedback on Lean Change Management, chapter 1

Hi Jason!

I'm reviewing your TXT file in Notepad++ while having lunch at home. I'm in a slightly annoyed mood because my music system was not delivered by the reseller this morning. Again! Hope it won't affect my appreciation for your writing. Fortunately, the sun is shining outside. :-)

Feedback:

- I appreciate the "rocket surgery" joke. I actually wondered if you wrote this intentionally, but I assume you did. I hope there will be more of these. (Feeling: amused)
- I appreciate the hotel story. It's very visual. (Feeling: interested)
- I like the mention of "pesky humans" and putting 'change resistance' in quotes. It shows you appreciate people. (Feeling: appreciation)
- I like the mention of "Nonsense". It gives you an attitude. (Feeling: appreciation)
- I like "the Crème Brûlée will come out nicely toasted". Metaphors are great. Keep using them. (Feeling: appreciation)
- Style issue: "to manage uncertainty better through Lean Startup." I miss a qualification here. Do you mean the book? The movement? The concept? (Feeling: puzzled)
- I noticed a number of style issues where in my opinion the sentences don't flow well. It confirms to me the text is not yet edited for style. (Feeling: none)
- I noticed a number of typos, including: "the my experience" "as a being a" "none of it stuff". I stopped marking them because I think a spelling and grammar checker could do this better than I can. (Feeling: slightly annoyed)

Suggestions:

- Always use a spell and grammar checker before sending texts to reviewers.
- Also: what helps me a lot is reading a text out loud. That way you find your tongue will be struggling with sentences where your brain doesn't. And this helps you catch the style issues.

I think the text is ready for editing for style, and I will be interested to see how that will change it.

Cheers,

Jurgen

What now?

You can start developing your remote communication skills using the feedback wrap exercise right now.

1. I noticed there is always something I can give feedback on. Whether it's a new software app I'm using, an article I'm reading, a text I'm reviewing for a friend, a website I'm testing for a colleague, a new hotel I'm staying in, or the delivery service of a product I just ordered. Just pay attention to the things you are involved in today, and pick one or two to give feedback on.

2. Ask people if your feedback wraps were valuable for them and if they see ways in which you could further improve them.

3. Pay attention to the people you sent your feedback to. Are they making changes to address the constructive feedback you gave them?

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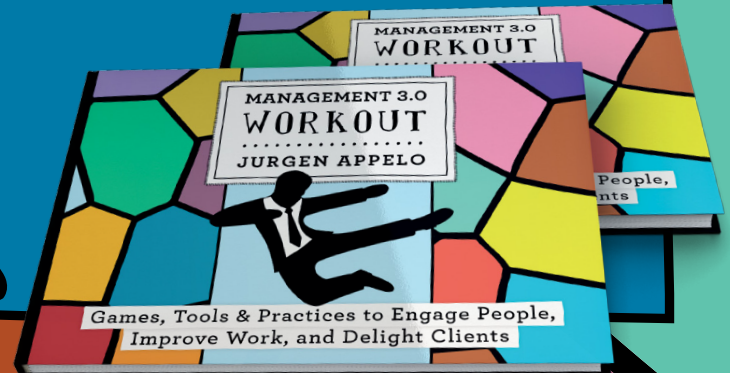
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WELL DONE!

YOU'RE ALMOST HALFWAY.

How do you like my book so far?
If you think others should read this too, can you please let them know they can read the book for free? Do you realize how cool you will look when others see that you are reading this book? :-)

MANAGEMENT 3.0
WORKOUT

MANAGEMENT 3.0
WORKOUT
JURGEN APPELO

Games, Tools & Practices to Engage People,
Improve Work, and Delight Clients

Better management, fewer managers!

Get Management 3.0 Workout for FREE:
http://m30.me/tweet #management30 #leadership

As an alternative, you can also copy/paste your supportive
message on Facebook, LinkedIn, or Google+

Thanks, I appreciate it!

Cheers,

Jurgen