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CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP



BIG IDEA In A Few Words

A critical aspect of personal development is feedback. The higher you go on the organizational chart the more difficult it is to get the feedback you need. In mature organizations good news flows up and bad news flows down, in carefully moderated one-way streets. The danger isn't that some leaders don't know what they don't know. It is they don't want to know what they don't know, at least not badly enough to create effective feedback loops. One of the essential duties of effective leadership is to take down the one-way street signs and clear the way for healthy feedback.

One of the most critical elements of personal development is feedback. It is nearly impossible to expose blind spots and close gaps in your emotional intelligence or leadership performance without timely and candid feedback. The paradox for leaders is the higher you go on the organizational chart the more difficult it is to get the kind of feedback you need to keep growing. As Marshall Goldsmith has pointed out, leaders are held back just as frequently by behaviors they need to stop as they are by competencies they need to develop. But few people want to tell the team leader or boss about a behavior he or she needs to stop.



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One Way Streets

One of the unintended consequences of organizational aging is the development of one-way streets for the flow of information. Eventually as organizational systems are refined, good news flows up and bad news flows down, in carefully moderated one-way streets. The lack of effective feedback loops limits personal development and organizational effectiveness.

On November 21, 1970, 56 U.S. soldiers conducted a bold, high risk raid on the Son Tay POW camp, deep inside the enemy lines of North Vietnam. They had trained rigorously, rehearsing the raid in conditions as close to what they would actually experience near a base in Florida as many as one hundred seventy times. The U.S. Air Force pilots logged more than one thousand hours of flying time in preparation. The Navy engaged in careful planning and preparation for an elaborate diversion on the night of the raid.

The special operations forces executed their plan flawlessly. The soldiers landed in the middle of the night ready to free the seventy POWs believed to be located there. Despite the extreme danger, there were no fatalities and only two injuries. More than one hundred enemy troops were killed, including Russian and Chinese advisors. Everything went according to plan except one important detail. There were no POWs located at the Son Tay camp at the time of the raid.

In the build up to the raid, one of the troubling factors was the lack of human intelligence confirming the POWs were still confined at the camp. Aerial photography showed a lessening of activity but it was not perceived to be sufficient information to block a raid the President clearly wanted to bolster public opinion and demoralize the enemy with proof we could strike deep inside their lines.

Then, days before the scheduled raid, a North Vietnamese intelligence source with more than a year of repeatedly reliable information reported to the CIA that no prisoners remained at the Son Tay camp. Nixon approved the raid but was never told about the contradictory new information. The military leaders believed Nixon would view this intelligence as “bad news” and the traffic flow for bad news was down not up. Reflecting on this sort of leadership challenge, General Colin Powell said, “Bad news isn’t

wine. It doesn't improve with age." This is the power of effective feedback loops.

Willful Blindness

Just after Thanksgiving in 2005, Donald Rumsfeld, then Secretary of Defense, and Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, held a press conference on the status of the war in Iraq. During the press conference several observers noticed Secretary Rumsfeld went out of his way to carefully avoid using the word insurgent. Eventually this became so obvious a journalist asked the Secretary why he was avoiding the word. Rumsfeld explained that over the Thanksgiving weekend he had an epiphany, realizing this group of people, referring to the Sunni, Shia and Al Qaeda in Iraq, were a group of people who don't merit the word "insurgency."

This became Rumsfeld's, and because he was Secretary of Defense, the entire military's, governing variable for understanding the war in Iraq. There was no insurgency, and therefore the entire discipline of counterinsurgency methodology as a response to our setbacks was not an option. But in a bold, even subversive move, Colonel H.R. McMaster began implanting counterinsurgency strategy effectively in Tal Afar, near the border of Syria. General David Petraeus, also convinced the official approach was doomed for failure, was the only divisional commander to run a successful campaign in the first year of the Iraq war. He was rewarded for his success by being passed over for promotion and eventually sent to Fort Leavenworth, seven thousand miles from Iraq, a clear signal to others who would not get in line with the official policy.

Undaunted, Petraeus determined to rewrite the Army doctrine on counterinsurgency. Most rewrites of military doctrine were unnoticed sidebars but Petraeus was determined this would be a rewrite with impact. He would include a diverse group in the process and meaningfully seek out feedback from the grass roots, including Colonel H.R. McMaster. Petraeus was successful in not only rewriting the policy but gaining the influence he would need to implement it.

Forced Feedback

Where did his passion for feedback come from? In 1981 Patraeus was a captain serving as an aid to Major General Jack Galvin. Galvin told Patraeus, "It's my job to run the division, and it's your job to critique me."⁴⁶ Captain Patraeus protested but unsuccessfully. Every month he placed a report card in his boss's in-tray with his critique of Galvin's performance.

From Major General Jack Galvin, David Patraeus learned a critical lesson. It is not enough to tolerate dissent, sometimes you have to demand it. He ordered Patraeus to speak freely despite the reluctance to criticize a superior officer. One of the essential duties of effective leaders is to take down the one-way street signs and clear the way for healthy feedback.

Feedback is the only consistent method for dealing with the information paradox that nearly every organization faces as it grows. The information paradox is that the most critical information in most organizations is on the periphery where very little of what is said is confidential. But leaders remain focused on another data set at the core of the organization, most of which is given inflated significance by the fact it is labeled confidential. The danger isn't just that some leaders don't know what they don't know. It is they don't want to know what they don't know, at least not badly enough to create effective feedback loops.

A Culture of Feedback

In November 2011, I interviewed Margaret Heffernan about her book, *Willful Blindness*. Margaret shared an example she learned from the Body Shop that reinforces a culture of bottom up feedback. During their new employee orientation, every employee is given a red envelope. They are told, "If you ever see something going on in this company that you are uncomfortable with, either with products or people or anything, please write it down, put your feedback in the red envelope, sign it if you want to but you don't have to, put it in the internal mail, and we guarantee the CEO will read it."

According to the Body Shop this system is almost never abused with trivial information, very little feedback is given anonymously, and it has definitely exposed areas for improvement they would not

otherwise have discovered. What is even more important about this system is the way it embeds the priority and importance of feedback into the culture of the organization and no doubt spills over into other areas.

The power of timely feedback to induce positive behavior change has been reinforced in recent years as the cost of the technology required to produce it has continued to decrease. One interesting case study is the 2003 dilemma faced by officials in Garden Grove, California: drivers were speeding through school zones. They replaced the speed limit signs with brighter and more prominent reminders of the twenty-five mile per hour limit during drop-off and pickup times. Police got more aggressive in ticketing motorists. But their efforts produced limited and intermittent results.

The city engineers decided to try something more passive and counterintuitive: they put up dynamic speed displays that show the speed limit and the speed of the driver based on a radar sensor mounted on a huge digital readout. This approach was counterintuitive in that it didn't tell drivers anything they didn't already know. Cars already have a speedometer. And there was no police presence to add punitive follow-up to the information telling a driver he or she is exceeding the speed limit.

The results were both fascinating and delightful. In the school zones where displays were installed, drivers slowed an average of fourteen percent and in three school zones the average speed actually went below the posted limit. Based on this information, the city expanded the approach to ten more schools. Similar results have been reported in many other communities. The radar equipped signs leverage a simple feedback loop that can profoundly impact behavior.

Without effective feedback loops your blind spots will expand and your performance will plateau, both personally and organizationally. So let me end with a few questions. What specific examples can you give of how your organization empowers and rewards feedback from all levels? To what extent does your organization have a grid of one-way street signs? Hint: if you don't ask anyone on the fringes you probably won't get a full picture. When was the last time you not merely tolerated but demanded honest

feedback from the people around you?

NOTES

⁴⁶ Tim Harford, *Adapt: Why Success Always Starts with Failure* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011) Kindle Edition page 62

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