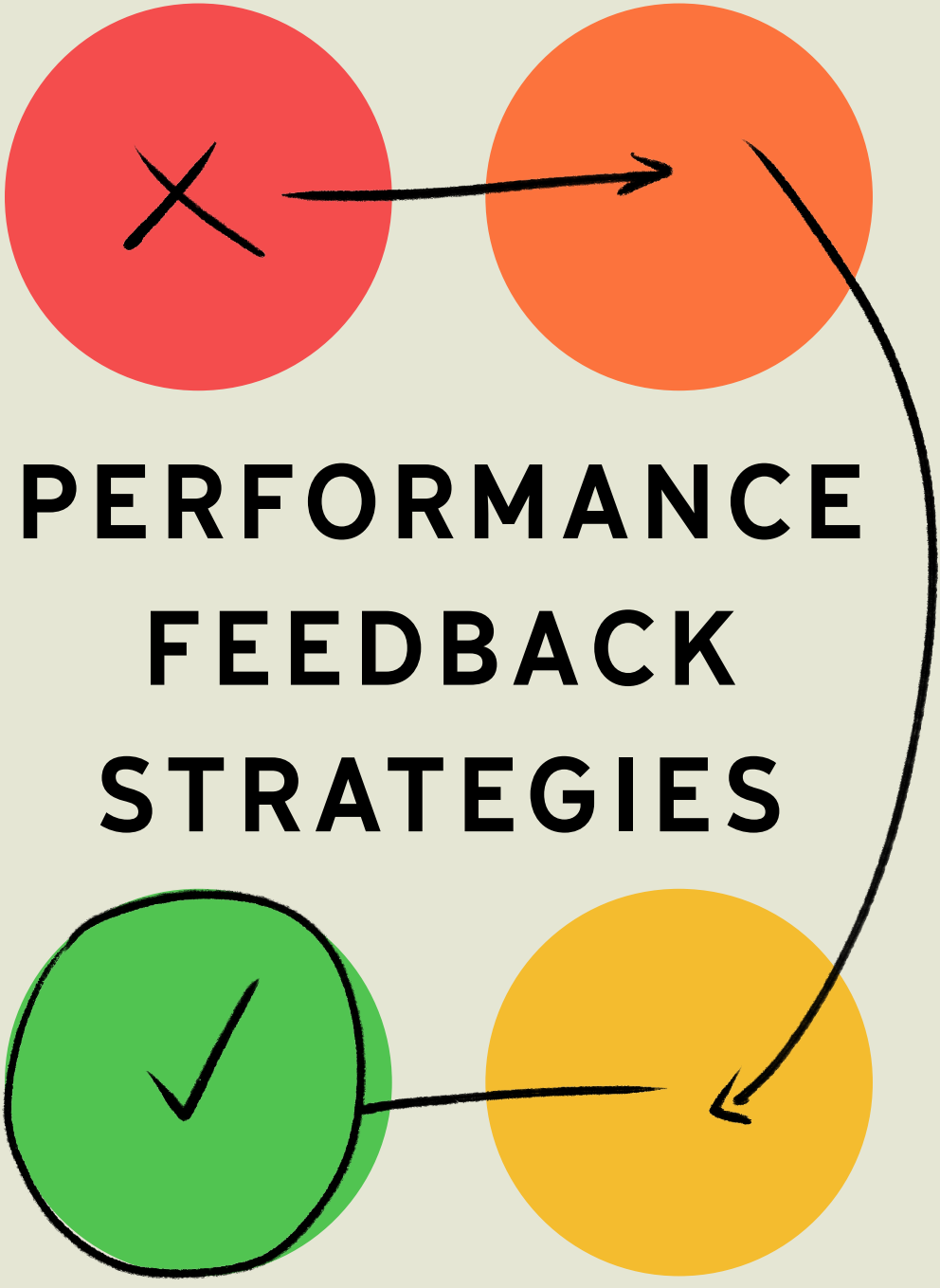
Sandra Mashihi and Kenneth Nowack



PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK STRATEGIES

Driving Successful Behavior Change

Praise for *Performance Feedback Strategies*

"*Performance Feedback Strategies* is one of those rare business books that are rooted in rock-solid science and deliver principles that can be put into use by everyone in your organization. The suggested models for performance feedback are incredibly useful and have withstood the test of time."

—Joel A. DiGirolamo, International Coaching Federation,
Vice President of Research and Data Science

"Ken and Sandra combine their considerable experience in serious research, hands-on consulting, training, and coaching as well as innumerable dialogues with other performance leaders to deliver a performance feedback framework that works. You cannot close this book without finding at least three great takeaways on how to improve performance feedback."

—Beverly Kaye, Co-Author, *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em*,
Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go, and *Up Is Not the Only Way*

"Sandra Mashihi and Ken Nowack's book is an invaluable resource offering strategies that anybody can implement immediately to improve their feedback skills and drive positive organizational change. The integration of AI in feedback processes makes this the business book of our time."

—Theresa Edy Kiene, CEO, Girl Scouts of Greater Los Angeles

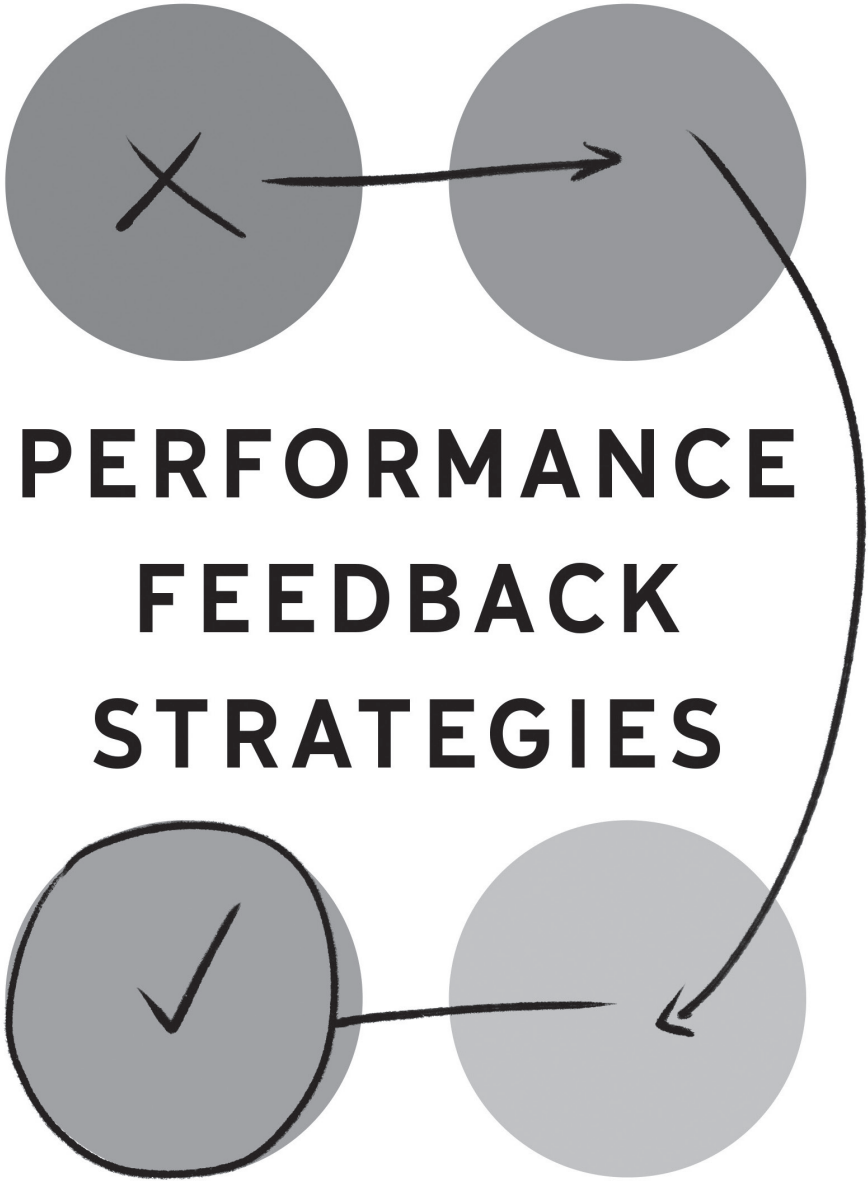
"*Performance Feedback Strategies* masterfully blends the science of feedback with the practice of coaching to bring forth pragmatic approaches to navigating the challenges of feedback conversations with both high and low performers. A must-read for people managers!"

—Woody Woodward, PhD, PCC, Clinical Assistant Professor,
Executive Coaching and Director, NYU School of
Professional Studies Coaching Innovation Lab

"Ken and Sandra review the science of feedback and use examples to show how sharing candid, concrete, feedforward information effectively facilitates employee professional development and improves operational performance. This entirely practical book gives managers the strategies and checklists they need to make communication easier and more effective."

—Paul J. Zak, PhD, Distinguished University Professor, Claremont Graduate University; Founder, Immersion Neuroscience; Author, *Immersion: The Science of the Extraordinary and the Source of Happiness*

Sandra Mashihi and Kenneth Nowack



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Introduction

Bridging the Feedback Gap

> "If you just communicate, you can get by. But if you communicate skillfully, you can work miracles."
> —Jim Rohn, entrepreneur and author

"We want to create a feedback culture in our company that fosters open, candid, and constructively helpful feedback," explained Kostas in a Zoom meeting with Ken and Sandra. "And we want all our leaders and employees involved."

Kostas had reached out to our team for help improving his organization's feedback culture after completing a company-wide survey that confirmed his gut feeling: The company's approach to feedback—up and down the chain of command—needed an overhaul.

What was clear right away was that we had to address the poor quality of communication between the company's leaders and employees at all levels if we were going to solve his problem. Kostas's company was not unique. A 2022 survey of more than 700 employees across a wide range of industries reported that less than half believed their leaders could "manage difficult conversations effectively" (Garr and Mehrotra 2023).

All the leaders in Kostas's global enterprise had years of experience and deep knowledge of how their industry worked, but few knew how to handle people and give candid feedback—whether positive or negative—to their direct reports. Making matters more difficult, the company's international

team represented many different cultures and spoke many languages. In some cases, divisions between leaders and team members along gender, cultural, and generational lines created serious misunderstandings and rifts.

Kostas ended our discussion with a challenge: "Sandra and Ken, the bottom line is that the leaders in our company need to learn how to deliver better, timelier, and more constructive feedback, and they have to understand that the feedback style that works with one employee might not be effective for another."

In less than an hour, our candid conversation with Kostas summed up many of the daunting communication and feedback challenges that contribute to dissatisfaction among employees and the difficulty in getting them to make and maintain changes to improve their performance.

As we strategized over the next few weeks about how to address the needs of this one company, we realized that most organizations could benefit from the model we were recommending as a solution for Kostas—a model based on our years of research and conversations with hundreds of global leaders. So, we decided to share that model in this book.

A strong and effective performance feedback culture starts with leadership practices and behaviors that are sensitive to today's diverse workforce. Leaders must be introspective and check in on the biases and stereotypes that shape their thoughts and actions, and then modify their behavior and communication styles to provide the most effective feedback possible to each employee. Using the four-part Performance Feedback Coaching Model we've developed, leaders can create simple, individualized feedback plans that inspire growth and successful behavior change in each employee, meeting them where they are and taking advantage of their unique technical knowledge, skills, and interpersonal strengths.

Employee Disengagement and Lack of Supportive Feedback

We know that good leaders adapt and change over time to help their organizations overcome challenges and grow stronger. We watched this happen in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and during periods of economic and technological change. Timely communication and collaboration are

crucial when organizations are at a crossroads, and leaders must rise to the challenge and find innovative ways to maintain effective relationships with their team members. And of course, when leaders face sudden, unfamiliar management challenges, employees face equally unfamiliar expectations that require new kinds of support from their organizations. Unfortunately, many organizations aren't prepared to provide that support, which contributes to employee disengagement. Our post-pandemic "new normal" includes not only hybrid schedules and more virtual meetings but also varying degrees of disengagement, discontent, and open feedback cultures across almost every industry.

If we condense the many definitions and measures of engagement into a few core truths, we see that performance and retention are strongly associated with the way people feel about their jobs, managers, and organizations. When we understand the roots of employee disengagement and resistance, we can move forward to solve the frustrations plaguing so many organizations today.

In 2023, Gallup reported that only 33 percent of employees were engaged at work. And 18 percent were actively disengaged (Harter 2024). Much of the current dissatisfaction among employees can be traced to inadequate or poor feedback from leaders and a lack of support on the job.

At this point, we believe the research is clear: Much of the current dissatisfaction among employees can be traced to inadequate or poor feedback from leaders and a lack of support on the job. In our coaching and consulting work with diverse organizations, employees tell us that performance standards and expectations are *ambiguous and limiting*. Other perceptions we see consistently include that employees:

- Have a lack of connection to the mission or purpose of their company
- Find fewer opportunities to learn and grow professionally than in the past
- Find fewer opportunities to leverage their signature strengths
- Do not see demonstrations of caring and support from senior leaders

Bridging the Feedback Gap

Through decades of working with people across global organizations, we have watched leaders struggle to package and deliver feedback in a way that helps employees understand and accept it, and then feel motivated to make the necessary behavior changes. More important, the problem is not usually that employees don't want to listen to feedback and improve their performance. In fact, one 2018 study found that 87 percent of employees wanted to "be developed" in their careers but only a third reported receiving the feedback they needed to engage and improve (Rock, Jones, and Weller 2018). Recent studies support our own observations of a wide *feedback gap* between employee expectations around performance feedback and what leaders are providing. Employee engagement and satisfaction surveys consistently show that while employees want specific, helpful, and constructive feedback, most say they don't get it.

The disconnect between employees' eagerness for constructive feedback and leaders' reluctance to provide it was observed in five experiments by a team of researchers at the University of California, Berkeley Haas School of Business (Abi-Esber et al. 2022). These researchers concluded that leaders truly underestimate how much employees crave feedback. The Eagle Hill Performance Management and Feedback Survey asked 1,000 US employees about their feedback preferences. Only 48 percent of those surveyed reported that they received feedback once every six months or annually, and another 8 percent reported never getting feedback at all (Eagle Hill 2022).

In our consulting, training, and coaching projects, we hear a range of complaints about performance feedback. Leaders' complaints tend to focus on employees being too needy, entitled, or unwilling to listen to corrective feedback. They'll often say things like:

- "I've given feedback numerous times, and my employees don't change."
- "Every time I have a performance-feedback conversation with my employee, I get backlash."
- "I've spent hours training and coaching my employees and they are still not satisfied."

- "We need to focus on the bottom line. . . . I don't have time to spend hours checking on my employees."
- "I'm not sure how to increase the motivation levels of my team."
- "I am spending more time trying to fix the mistakes of my direct reports than developing other employees."
- "I don't have time to work on strategic initiatives because I am so focused on trying to engage and develop my staff."
- "I just can't communicate with millennials (or Gen Zers). They are too entitled."

In contrast, employees often share frustration about leaders who refuse to listen, don't support career development, or are disrespectful. More often than you might expect, we hear employees say, "I'm considering leaving my organization because of my supervisor." Here are a few other things we've heard:

- "My supervisor's feedback style is one-sided. I'm not included and there's no attention to my career growth."
- "My boss does not listen."
- "My boss doesn't understand me or my needs."
- "My boss is not challenging me."
- "I get minimal feedback from my supervisor."
- "My career is not growing under my supervisor's leadership."
- "My leader is not empowering me."
- "My supervisor only focuses on what I do wrong. I never receive positive reinforcement."
- "My leader is not clear or transparent."
- "My leader is not respecting me working from home."

Given that this feedback gap contributes to frustration for both leaders and employees, we believe it is more important than ever for organizations to create *a participative culture that facilitates psychological safety and interpersonal trust in the workplace.*

Our Performance Feedback Coaching Model bridges the feedback gap by providing a road map leaders can use to drive engaging conversations tailored to each employee. Thousands of leaders around the world have already used

our model to enhance engagement, improve on-the-job performance—and most importantly—retain high-potential talent. Now you can use it and evaluate too.

Based on two universal dimensions of the way we perceive others—*warmth* and *competence* (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2008)—our model is designed to help leaders categorize direct reports into one of four coaching groups to enhance individual performance:

- **Performance management:** Employees with high overall performance and low interpersonal competence
- **Performance acceleration:** Employees with high overall performance and high interpersonal competence
- **Performance enhancement:** Employees with low overall performance and high interpersonal competence
- **Performance improvement:** Employees with low overall performance and low interpersonal competence

These four groups then become the model's foundation and guide leaders to engage in tailored feedback conversations that improve motivation for employees who want to perform, grow, and learn. In this book, you'll find practical strategies, tips, and tools to facilitate collaborative, supportive, and empathetic conversations between leaders and employees in each group of our model.

Understanding and using the common characteristics in each of the four categories provides a level of analysis and insight not available through other methods. Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to sharing feedback and leading others. Every employee is unique, bringing their skills, interests, values, motivations, personalities, and styles to the workplace. In addition, as employees grow and develop, their performance levels may vary over time depending on many work and nonwork-related factors. The same is true for each leader. Our model is not designed to relegate employees to a restrictive category, but to help leaders provide *individualized development plans* for each of their direct reports.

We want to make all feedback conversations effective and worthwhile, so they result in both enhanced performance and successful behavior change.

What's Ahead in This Book

As organizational psychologists with decades of experience researching, coaching, and training leaders all around the world, we have written this book to help leaders at every level effectively manage performance and behavior change in employees across cultures, genders, and generations. Our performance feedback model is based on the latest research in neuroscience, social psychology, and organizational psychology, in addition to our own executive coaching experiences with diverse clients. It will help you become a better communicator and influencer so you'll be able to help your direct reports leverage their signature strengths, enhance their engagement, and foster their ongoing professional growth and development.

> Organizations that create a culture of continuous feedback are 3.5 times more likely to sustain high performance and employee well-being (Guggenberger et al. 2023).

In the chapters that follow, we share stories from our own experiences and from clients in a range of industries, drawing on lessons from large corporations, small businesses, international organizations, government entities, nonprofits, and startups. In sharing our stories, we have changed names and situations to ensure clients' anonymity and confidentiality.

This book is divided into two parts, both built on the science and practice of performance feedback coaching. In part 1, we discuss the challenges of providing feedback and the impact of feedback on employees from a neuroscientific perspective (Williams and Nowack 2022). We build upon our 3E Model of Successful Individual Behavior Change and explain the science of initiating new behaviors and making them automatic.

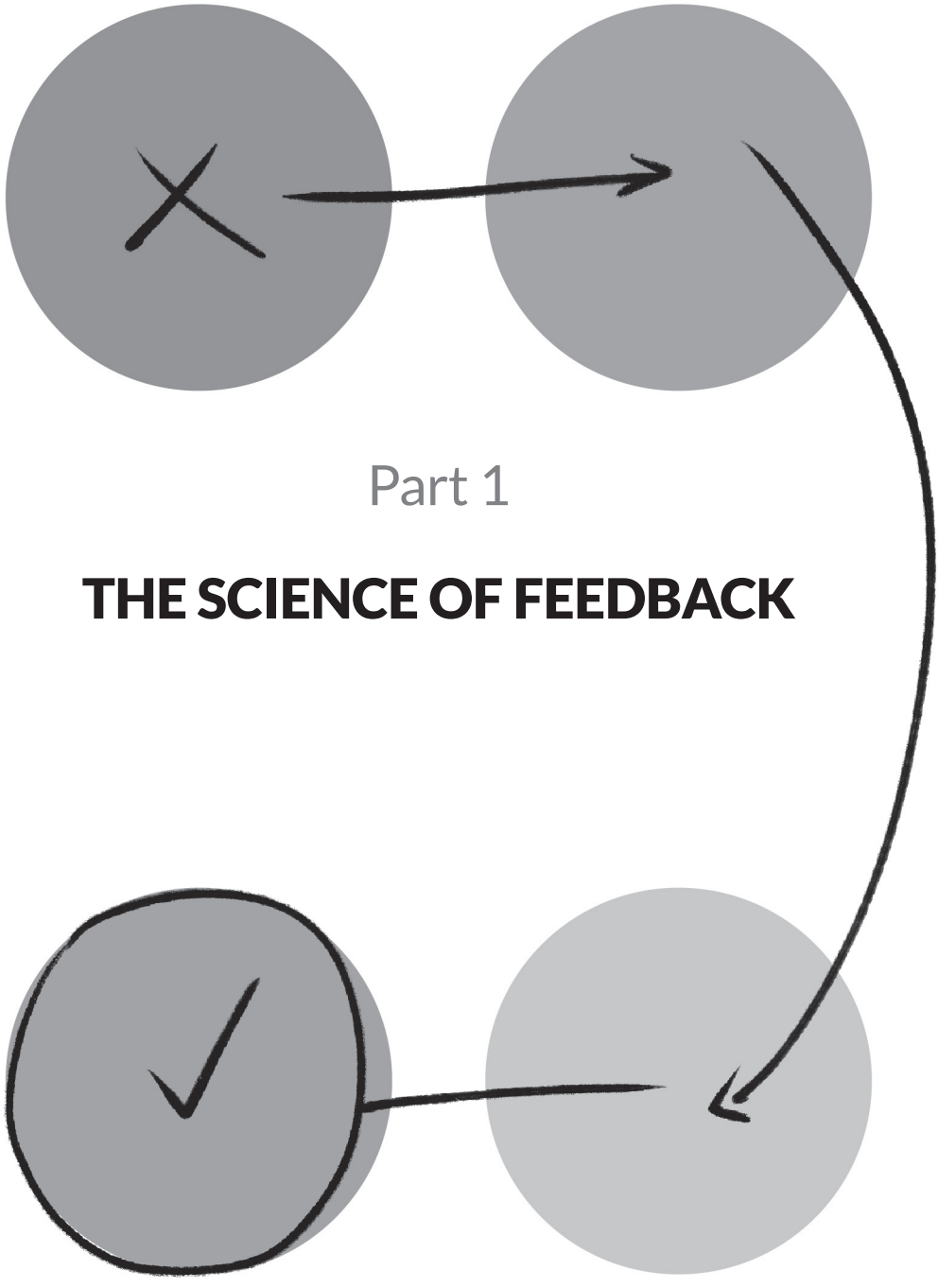
The key to successful sustained behavior change turns out to be *self-insight*, which is largely brought about by direct feedback from others (Nowack 2009). So, we also include information about how to establish working relationships that are collaborative, psychologically safe, and trusting to encourage self-awareness and avoid potentially damaging social interactions. We share the factors that contribute to perceived trustworthiness and their

importance in giving and receiving feedback. And we summarize what makes for effective feedback, considering important individual factors such as gender, race, culture, and age.

In part 2, we introduce our complete Performance Feedback Coaching Model. Each chapter in this section includes specific techniques, strategies, tools, and tips for conducting effective feedback conversations with the four categories of employees. We end with a look at how artificial intelligence (AI) is helping and challenging the performance feedback process and a brief conclusion.

We've designed this book to help leaders like you—at all levels up and down your organization's hierarchy—appreciate the latest science around feedback and habit change and deploy that science to enhance your ability to communicate with, re-engage, and retain your diverse and valuable group of employees.

Let's start now.



Part 1

THE SCIENCE OF FEEDBACK

Chapter 1

The Power and Purpose of Feedback

Sandra is now the mother of two beloved children, but like many women, her path to motherhood wasn't easy. When she finally became pregnant at age 38, Sandra chose a world-renowned obstetric gynecologist known for handling high-risk, complex cases with incredible skill. Patients traveled from all over the US to seek Dr. T's counsel, literally placing their lives and their children's lives in his hands.

Unfortunately, with each visit to Dr. T's office, Sandra felt increasingly unsettled. Despite his talent and reputation, she found that Dr. T also had profound deficits—including a lack of empathy and an inability to communicate effectively with his patients. For example, when medical staff dropped subtle hints about a potential complication with Sandra's pregnancy, Dr. T never clearly addressed or explained the situation.

Sandra's uneasiness only worsened during her first trimester screening. Dr. T didn't utter a word while performing the ultrasound.

"What's happening? Is everything OK?" Sandra asked eagerly.

"I see something here," was all he said—his face blank and body stiff.

"What is it?" she prodded.

In a calm, matter-of-fact tone, Dr. T replied, "There are some spots on your placenta."

While his demeanor indicated the spots could be a minor issue—Sandra somehow knew they weren't. So, she asked again, "What does that mean? Is the baby going to be OK? What do I do now?"

Her questions were clear and direct, but Dr. T refused to reply or make eye contact. Instead, all he said was, "Let's continue to monitor it." And he then immediately left the room.

Over the next few weeks, Sandra tried to speak to Dr. T by phone, but only got messages delivered by his nurses in return. She was anxious and frustrated by the doctor's curt, cold responses, but she told herself his exceptional skills and stellar reputation were what mattered.

During the final ultrasound, Dr. T simply said, "There is no heartbeat. . . . I'm sorry." Then he left the room and asked his nurse to tell Sandra what would happen next. For Sandra, the anguish of losing her child was made even more painful because in that moment she felt completely isolated and uncared for by the physician she had trusted. He expressed no empathy, offered no explanations, and made her feel like she was just another patient on a long list.

We share this personal story to shine a light on how essential it is for people in powerful positions to communicate with sensitivity rather than making others feel ignored, unimportant, or anxious. If you're a leader with people who look to you for guidance, your skills and reputation simply aren't enough. Unfortunately, many people we coach aren't aware of how they come across or how their words, tone, and body language are perceived. We often say that leaders who lack self-awareness and don't understand their influence on others were born with a "no-clue gene."

On the other hand, we all know people with a strong, innate sense of self-awareness and empathy for others. They have a gift that enables them to forge productive interpersonal relationships and communicate effectively with anyone. They can sense when they're coming across as jerks, need to listen more carefully to other people's views, or even when their jokes aren't funny.

In the workplace, most of us fall somewhere between being fully empathetic and having that no-clue gene. We're sometimes able to connect with and support colleagues and employees when they need it most. And sometimes, like Dr. T, we're oblivious to the impact our words and behavior have on others. We have to learn good communication skills through trial and

error, and if we don't come by self-awareness naturally, we must cultivate it—especially if we want to lead others effectively.

In our work as leadership coaches, the same questions arise again and again: Why do so many leaders fail the self-awareness test? Why can't they see how they're perceived by others? In other words, why is the "no-clue gene" so dominant, and how can we counteract it to improve our leaders' ability to communicate with their teams and provide feedback that gets results? We've found some of the answers to these questions in recent social science research, and in this chapter, we'll begin to explore what that research can teach us about providing performance feedback in a way that leads recipients toward the goals of *understanding*, *acceptance*, and *action*.

The Science of Self-Awareness

We all face daily challenges at work that can erode our self-esteem, confidence, and well-being. We adapt in numerous ways, including inflating our own skills and abilities, imagining that we have more control over events than we really do, and looking at the future through an overly optimistic lens. To maintain enough self-confidence to thrive, we may need to tell ourselves we are more competent, skilled, and knowledgeable than other people. For example, a classic study at US universities found that 90 percent of college professors believed their teaching was above average compared with that of their colleagues (Cross 1997). This positive illusion or self-enhancement bias is a normal human adaptation, but it can become a big problem in the workplace if leaders and employees over- or underestimate their abilities relative to how others evaluate them in feedback (Taylor et al. 2000).

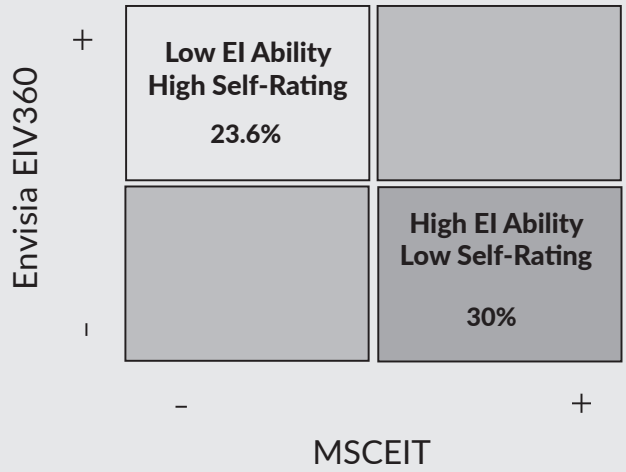
How Leaders Rate Themselves

In collaboration with the University of Barcelona, we did a study comparing self-ratings of more than 178 leaders at different levels of their organizations (Alzina and Escoda 2007). The study also compared those scores against two validated measures of emotional intelligence (EI) to see how accurate leaders were when assessing their own EI:

- A self-assessment of 22 emotional and social competencies (Nowack 2013).

- The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), a well known ability-based assessment that measures EI through an individual's abilities to perceive, comprehend, act on, and manage emotional information.

Our analysis found that 23.6 percent of study respondents provided high self-ratings but scored low on the MSCEIT. We also found that 30 percent rated their EI competence low but scored high on the MSCEIT. **In other words, more than half of the leaders in our study either overestimated or underestimated their demonstrated ability to understand, manage, and use emotional intelligence.**



Self-enhancement bias in the larger population can lead to the illusion of one group's superiority over other groups. In organizations, this bias may cause leaders and employees to overestimate their skill levels and abilities, and we see this frequently in our consulting work. For instance, if an executive board asks a leader to assess their skill at building a team and effectively developing others by comparing themselves to other leaders in the company, that leader will likely rate themselves above average. Of course, some leaders and employees chronically underestimate their true skills and abilities, but that's a much less common occurrence.

Weak Skills, Strong Confidence

The tendency of leaders and employees with weaker skills to provide skewed positive assessments of their abilities is known as the Dunning-Kruger effect. Many leaders simply don't recognize what they don't know about their own competence and how they are perceived by others (Kruger and Dunning 1999). They are also prone to expressing unfounded confidence and a lack of judgment about their actual skill levels (Sanchez and Dunning 2018).

Despite some suggestions that the Dunning-Kruger effect is nothing more than the better-than-average effect (Gaze 2023), our experience coaching and teaching executives has convinced us that overestimation of skills and misinterpretation of their influence on others is more common in those who are less competent. So, if most leaders and employees inaccurately judge their skills, communication styles, and personalities, then receiving feedback from others should be quite useful for navigating interpersonal relationships at work. The congruence between how leaders evaluate their skills, abilities, and blind spots (their "identity") with how other colleagues experience them (their "reputation") is an important focus in most executive coaching assignments (Vergauew, Hofmans, and Willie 2022).

Windows Into Ourselves and Others

The Johari Window model provides a wonderful way to help people better understand their relationships with themselves and colleagues at work or elsewhere, and we often include references to this model in our coaching. The Johari model was created in 1955 by two psychologists, Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham (they chose the name by combining their first names; Luft 1963). Its primary goal is helping leaders and employees understand the differences between how people see them and how they see themselves. The components are a person's *self-knowledge* and *self-disclosure to others* and yield four quadrants within the larger window:

- **Open**—known to yourself and to others; these are your *traits*.
- **Hidden**—known to yourself but not known to others; this is your *identity*.
- **Unknown**—not known at all to yourself or others.

- **Blind spot**—not known to yourself, but known to others; this is your *reputation.*

Imagine each quadrant as a window you can widen or narrow to different sizes. Let's use Ken's characteristics to look at each window in more detail.

Those who know Ken well, including Sandra, would describe the traits in his open window as intellectually curious, supportive, collaborative, humble, and willing to coach and mentor others. In the workplace, the *open window* is visible to all and is a match between how we describe ourselves (our identity) and how others experience us (our reputation).

Ken's *hidden window* includes key parts of his identity that others are not aware of. For example, in 1975 he was involved in a high-profile kidnapping and bank robbery in California, which resulted in the death of an innocent woman by armed radicals billing themselves as the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). Curious to know more? Feel free to search on the internet, ask an AI engine or chatbot, or seek out government records using the Freedom of Information Act; but you won't learn more than the sentence shared above (unless you get an AI hallucination!). Ken's involvement in this case is an integral part of his own identity, but it's completely hidden from others. In your organization, employees' hidden windows are those private parts of their identities and experiences that mark the separation of work and external relationships and activities.

What about the *unknown window*? A few years ago, neither Ken nor anyone else knew that he and Sandra would write and publish a book in 2025. So, while that was once part of his unknown window, it isn't anymore. When a new employee joins your organization, their unknown window is large: How will they interact with other members of the team? Will their ideas conflict with the leader's? Which of their strengths will be the most important to their success and which weaknesses will be the most problematic? We can all shrink our unknown windows over time through careful observation of ourselves, counseling or therapy, and expanding our interactions with others.

As you may have guessed by now, the *blind spot window*—those things not known to us but known to others—is what most people want to shrink. Fortunately, through feedback, we can become more aware of how others view our skills, abilities, habits, and actions and respond accordingly.

One of Ken's former blind spots was that he sometimes came across as inadequately recognizing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of others, which eroded their confidence and self-esteem. By listening to understand more frequently and asking more questions rather than providing his own experiences and expertise first, Ken was able to become a better performance coach and shrink this blind spot. In your organization, you'll want to consider each employee's blind spots and how your feedback can help them become more aware of how others experience the impact of their behavior. Specific feedback to employees—such as, "Have you noticed that you interrupted others on more than one occasion?" or "For your next presentation, consider repeating the questions from your audience before responding"—can help illuminate blind spots and provide constructive suggestions for improvement.

Social Feedback Loops to Cultivate Self-Awareness

Our internal, personal experiences and our external experiences with others involve complex feedback loops. For our purposes, a *feedback loop* is an interaction that provides people with information about their actions. The feedback can be positive or negative, and the interaction can be biological or social. For example, when people have a "normal" circadian wake-and-sleep rhythm and experience normal zeitgebers (events like sunrise and sunset that set our biological clocks), their brains create a biological feedback loop that tells them when to go to bed at night and when to rise in the morning—all repeated within a 24-hour cycle. In the workplace, leaders create social feedback loops to educate, inform, and share observations, seeking specific behavioral changes in their employees.

Let's return to the Johari model for a moment. If you have a small blind spot, there's a greater congruence between your self-evaluation and how other people perceive you, which is an ideal situation for most of us. We can use feedback to illuminate our blind spots and gain self-awareness, increase the size of our open window, and make improvements on and off the job.

Good social feedback targeted to our blind spots can lead to three important outcomes, each culminating in a change in thought, feeling, or behavior. Let's now look at these social feedback outcomes and consider how leaders can use them to pave the way for success.

Feedback Outcome 1. Understanding

To ensure that employees understand feedback, leaders need to provide information, data, and observations that are educational. The employee needs to learn how others perceive their behavior and how their behavior affects others. Feedback can be positive such as praise, recognition, reinforcement for desired behaviors, or future-oriented with tips and suggestions for improvement. Feedback can also be critical and negative if it is framed, received, or experienced as a harsh judgment or a put-down of the recipient.

Critical or negative feedback in a workplace is rarely helpful, because leaders and employees quickly ignore or dismiss it. In addition, the employee typically reaches out to others to seek more encouraging or positive feedback, which is called "shopping for confirmation" (Green, Gino, and Staats 2017).

Research suggests that 72 percent of employees prefer corrective feedback (or suggestions of better ways to do things in the future or ways to improve), over both negative and positive feedback (Zenger and Folkman 2014). The timing and use of positive versus corrective feedback may be related to the employee's personality, their level of experience, and their maturity. For example, positive feedback is much more motivating for novices and employees beginning a goal that requires new knowledge or skills (Schroeder and Fishbach 2015).

The lesson for leaders is to pay attention to new employees, those in new positions, or those acquiring new skills, and emphasize what they are doing well in immediate corrective feedback to reinforce their behaviors.

Feedback Outcome 2. Acceptance

Leaders need employees to not only understand but also accept the feedback they're given. Employees' reactions to feedback vary widely and can include surprise, hurt, anger, and even depression. In the workplace, reactions matter because if an employee is upset, angry, or dismissive about the feedback they receive, it will have little or no impact on their thoughts, beliefs, or future behaviors. In other words, their blind spots will remain the same.

When we sit down to coach a leader, we often check not only how well another person understood the leader's feedback, but also whether the individual truly sees value in the feedback shared with them. Accepting the value

of feedback is related to the recipient's intrinsic motivation to act and commit to change at an interpersonal or emotional level.

Does Feedback Lead to Positive and Lasting Behavior Change?

Research suggests that only 47 percent of initiatives that consisted of feedback alone—not in combination with things like goal setting or behavioral consequences—had a positive effect on employee performance, while 53 percent had a mixed effect (Alvero, Bucklin, and Austin 2001). This suggests that in some cases, feedback not only has little or no impact on actual behavior change, but could also lead to discouragement, disengagement, and strong negative emotional reactions (Nowack 2014, 2016).

Leaders need to think about the best way to frame employee feedback and what they can do to minimize any possible defensive reaction or rejection of the message. When performance feedback is delivered frequently and perceived as helpful and supportive, good individual and organizational outcomes will result. For example, a recent meta-analysis found a significant association between performance feedback to employees and positive organizational citizenship behavior, including discretionary effort and cooperation with others (Tagliabue, Sigurjonsdottir, and Sandaker 2020). This leads us to ask about the best strategies and techniques for enhancing people's acceptance of the feedback. Let's look at a few now.

The Feedback Sandwich

One popular feedback technique is to initially offer praise—such as a compliment or a meaningful positive observation about the person's performance or behavior—and then provide constructive feedback, criticism, or suggestions to improve, followed by more encouraging feedback. This "feedback sandwich" is intended to avoid defensiveness and dismissal of the more constructive or critical feedback.

However, recent studies suggest that the criticism-sandwiched-between-praise approach is ineffective and can create disengaged employees and erode trust. This outcome is magnified in the context of teaching new skills, and is the opposite of what feedback is intended to accomplish (Bottini and Gillis

2021). The sandwich approach can also cause a greater stress response in employees if they're anxious about your true intent and message.

A better option is to be direct and candid—provide feedback without starting the conversation with a compliment or praise. Leaders need to get over their discomfort about delivering constructive feedback because employees really just want to know how they are doing.

Feedforward

Establishing a future orientation to feedback does seem to significantly increase both understanding and acceptance and enhance performance and effectiveness. In two separate studies, people were significantly more motivated to improve when they perceived feedback as concentrating on future actions rather than their past performance (Gnepp et al. 2020).

The main takeaway for leaders is to frame feedback as a set of tips, suggestions, recommendations, and ideas for the future, with the ultimate goal of helping the employee. This approach is often referred to as *feedforward*, and it is universally met with less resistance (Kluger 2006). After all, who doesn't want trusted advice and encouragement to be a better version of ourselves in the future?

Feedback Outcome 3. Commitment to Action

The gold standard by which you measure your feedback's effectiveness is whether the employee pays attention, increases their motivation to improve, and then takes observable action to do so. This is the purpose of feedback—not idle chatter or thoughts shared with employees without a goal in mind. In our executive coaching practice, we often see the first two feedback outcomes—understanding and acceptance—without firm commitments to action focused on specific behaviors. Sometimes, leaders and employees share their intentions to change with us, but the intentions don't result in any meaningful or sustained change over time. In fact, intentions to change are quite weak predictors of actual behavior change over time (Nowack 2017).

There is no guarantee that effective feedback will lead to successful goal setting and change in an employee's job performance. However, without structuring, framing, tailoring, and delivering feedback to employees in ways they can understand, accept, and follow up with an attempt to act, nothing will change.

Unfortunately, for some people we have coached over the years, natural skills and abilities simply limit their range of success. In other words, executive coaching probably won't transform many competent jerks into lovable stars.

In chapter 5, we will expand upon our approach to individual habit and behavior change, which we call the 3E Model of Successful Individual Behavior Change. This model supports the three outcomes of feedback we've just discussed and provides a variety of useful steps leaders can use to help employees translate insights they understand and accept into deliberate actions. Before we introduce this model and our practical tips, we will provide some background into the neuroscience of feedback and how that translates into the practical challenges leaders face when feedback is deemed judgmental, unfair, incorrect, or biased. Armed with this basic understanding of how feedback works in our brains, leaders can reflect on their current biases around delivering feedback and apply evidence-based strategies and techniques to minimize the pain that may inadvertently occur during conversations with employees.

✓ Key Points

Let's review a few key points from this chapter:

- Most people have inaccurate and biased estimates of their knowledge, skills, and abilities relative to others. Exposing blind spots and increasing self-awareness are essential steps toward effective leadership and improved employee performance.
- When providing feedback, leaders should strive for one or more of these three outcomes:
  - The employee understands the feedback.
  - The employee is willing to accept and try on the perspectives, experiences, and perceptions provided in the feedback.
  - The employee commits to action, which leads to goal setting, deliberate practice, and changes in behavior.
- Leaders can use specific strategies to help ensure that others accept their feedback and then stop, increase, decrease, or change specific behaviors as needed. It's a truism that only wet babies like change, but if we are ready to accept feedback and committed to changing our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, we can rewire our brains and create new habits.

Tool 1-1. Tips for Facilitating Successful Feedback Outcomes

Understanding

1. Structure the environment to minimize distractions and maximize focus.
2. Introduce and structure the feedback session with clearly defined goals and intended outcomes.
3. Check your biases about the feedback receiver's current performance and potential.
4. Explain what information you will be sharing with the employee (your observations, observations of others, 360-feedback results, or performance behavior).
5. Schedule enough time to adequately cover all the feedback information you want to share.

Acceptance

1. Before jumping into sharing feedback information with the employee, take time to ask about their perceptions of their current performance and their ideal or future self.
2. Listen for responses that suggest employee defensiveness, negative emotional reactions, or dismissal of the credibility or accuracy of the feedback information hared.
3. Periodically check with the employee to summarize their perceptions about what is validating and what is surprising in the feedback information presented.
4. Regularly check with the employee and ask them to summarize what they agree and disagree with in terms of the feedback shared.
5. Focus on the areas the employee agrees with and accepts.

Commitment to Action

1. Ask the employee what, if anything, they might be motivated to further consider or take specific action to leverage concerning the strengths you shared or potential development areas.
2. Ask the employee how their commitment to action can be translated into a goal they want to work on that will be helpful for them in the future.
3. Ask the employee what barriers might prevent them from successfully reaching this goal.
4. Ask the employee what you can do as a coach, mentor, or peer to help support their success in reaching the goal.
5. Ask the employee how they can measure and evaluate their success in translating feedback from the meeting into successful behavior change perceived by others.

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About the Authors

Sandra Mashihi, PhD, is an organizational psychologist and leadership coach who has more than 20 years of experience coaching and training leaders to improve their behaviors in a way that leads to their team's high performance and effectiveness. Sandra has expertise in leadership development, executive presence, stress management, team building, talent management, managing corporate politics, and interpersonal relationships in the workplace. She has worked with leaders and teams throughout various companies including Fortune 500s. She works on a one-on-one basis, as well as facilitating group coaching programs along various topics, such as emotional intelligence, performance feedback coaching, and emerging leadership programs.

Sandra runs a boutique consulting firm called Spectra Coaching. She also serves as an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University's Graziadio School of Business and Management, The California School of Professional Psychology, and other professional institutions where she teaches leadership and organizational behavior for MBA and Doctoral students.

Sandra's expertise helping clients form new and lasting behaviors that become habits makes her coaching unique. She applies her expertise based on her experience working with various types of leaders and her research on best practices for effective behavioral change. Her approach with each client

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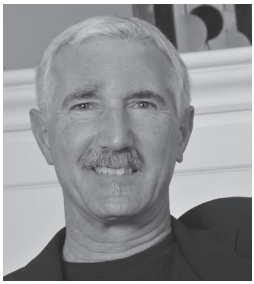
Sandra lives in Los Angeles along with her husband and two very special young children who help her practice feedback skills each day! In her free time, Sandra loves hiking, painting, and being with her loving family and friends.



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About ATD

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