

# FORMS OF INTERPERSONAL FEEDBACK

*the differing functions  
and impacts of  
data-sharing processes*

Probably no activity is more widely used and less understood than the process of interpersonal feedback, particularly as it has been articulated in the current training movement involving laboratory experience variously called T-groups, encounter groups, sensitivity groups and others. The purpose of this paper is to spell out the various kinds of data-sharing processes that fall under the general heading "feedback." It would seem that these forms of data sharing would have differing impacts on others and perhaps by clarifying the processes it may be possible for persons to develop greater skill in a most needed activity.

Feedback is a process of data sharing in which a person receives from others information about his own behavioral performance. There are two parts to feedback — first, giving data about the nature of the behavior, usually describing the behavior as a person sees or experiences it; second, sharing information with the person as to how the receiver feels about or responds to the behavior.

The sharing of feedback data is not a new process; a new term is merely being used. Only recently has the process come under serious scrutiny to see what kinds of feedback lead to the most beneficial interpersonal results.

Following is one way of differentiating the forms of feedback we commonly experience:

## OBJECTIVE-DESCRIPTIVE

This is a process of trying to describe as clearly and objectively as possible the behaviors one has seen another person utilize. This is feedback only in the first part as defined above — it does not tell a person the effect his behavior has had on others but is a reporting back to the person a description of his behavior as seen by an observer. Following are examples of this type of feedback:

"You spoke only three times during the last hour."

"When you talk you look only at the trainer, never at anyone else."

"When you talk you always look down or away, but never directly at the person you are talking to."

"You tried to get into the conversation four times but never succeeded and then you didn't try again."

This type of feedback attempts to give a person a mirror image of what his behavior is like. We are often not aware of the behaviors we utilize and the purpose of this type of feedback generally is to help the person more clearly look at his own behavior.

A skillful observer, through this feedback process, can help another person look at his behavior more carefully. An observer might tell a manager or group leader that at his last meeting Mr. A raised his hand three times but the leader ignored him. Or he might point out that the leader cut two people off, contradicted or rejected the contributions of three others, rephrased a proposition that had been made in his own language that was different than the original and pressed for a vote when others said they still wanted to discuss.

Such a description might be very helpful to the person receiving the data even though he did not get any information about how anyone actually felt about his performance. The receiver of the feedback is left to ponder over the possible consequences or impacts of his behavior on others. The observer may report some consequential data such as, "When you ignored Mr. A, I saw him pick up a paper and read it throughout the rest of the meeting and he never contributed again." The observer might also engage in another type of feedback.

## ASSUMED OR GUESSED IMPACT

This type of feedback shows the assumptions or the guesses by a second party observer as to what the observer thinks or guesses the impact of the person's behavior is. Some examples of this type of feedback are:

"I think you hurt Mary's feelings. I saw her crying after you scolded her."

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"I think that there is a lot of hostility and resentment toward you as a result of the way you conducted the meeting."

"If I were Joe, I would really be angry with you if you treated me the way you did him."

The person receiving this type of feedback may find this helpful for he may not have detected how people were feeling about his behavior. But it is also non-validated feedback — it is only a guess as to how people feel and think. A sensitive, insightful observer may be able to pick up the feelings of others to a close degree, but it is not the same as getting direct data from the object of the behavior. The direct feedback process allows the possibility of working through some differences not possible in the second party guess, but such guessed impact may give the person receiving the feedback some clues about what he may want to do about his behavior in the future or may suggest some actions needed to be taken to actually check out the impact on the person involved.

### SECOND PARTY REPORT OF IMPACT

From time to time a person may receive feedback about the impact of his behavior on others but it comes from someone other than the direct recipient of the behavior. It is a second party report of data that he has received from someone else. Examples would be:

"Tom told me that he was afraid to come into your office for he always feels you put him on the spot."

"I talked with someone (I can't mention names) who told me that he felt very upset with the way you hog the limelight at staff meetings."

Second party data has some built-in difficulties although it may be perfectly accurate. First, there is always the possibility that it is not being reported exactly as the other person experienced it. Secondly, it is not possible to interact directly with the person to work through any difficulties. Such opportunities must be set up later. Third, the

person reporting the data may be uneasy about the confidentiality problem. While the person receiving the impact may not have directly said not to report it, the second party doesn't know if he can legitimately tell who said it, and the person receiving the feedback doesn't know if he can then respond directly to the person when the data he has received has come through a second party and presumably the impact person does not know the feedback has been given. However, in light of the secondhand report, the person receiving the feedback may still go ahead with some plans for altering his behavior that may lead to more desirable consequences.

### DIRECT DESCRIPTIVE IMPACT

Most people who have written about feedback have postulated that this may be the most useful form of feedback. This is a descriptive process first describing the person's behavior and then describing your reactions to that behavior. This is done directly between the persons involved. Examples would be:

"When you yelled at me just now it made me feel very hostile and resentful toward you."

"When you supported me on that motion, I felt very appreciative and good toward you."

The advantage of this form is that it gives the person receiving the feedback a clear picture of his behavior and what effect or impact that behavior has on others. When given directly it often opens up the opportunity to deal directly with the person and to have a chance to work out a resolution of any difficulty. This direct feedback must also be accompanied by such conditions as a climate of trust and concern, a desire to improve the relationship, time to work on the issue, and complementary expectations that such feedback is appropriate and desirable if the feedback is going to be optimally beneficial. However, if stated in the direct descriptive terms it shares the data in a way that allows the person to work most easily with the information.

Sometimes we get feedback that is descriptive but represents only part of the total descriptive formula. Examples would be:

"I feel very uneasy with you."

"You make me feel inferior and stupid."

The person receiving the feedback knows how the person feels about him, but he does not know exactly what kind of behavior produces the feelings. It is thus difficult to know what one can do to alter the feelings in others.

### DIRECT EVALUATION

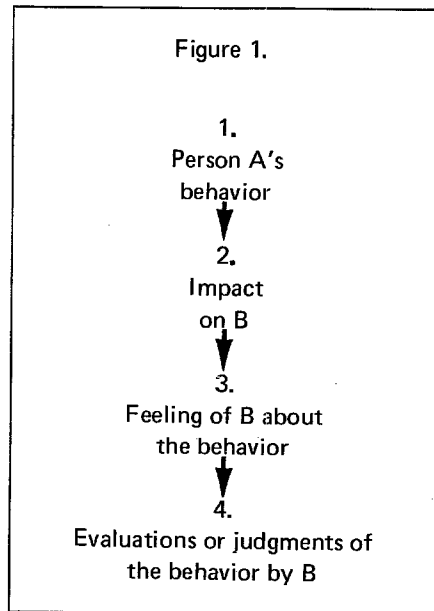
When in the process of human interaction one person responds to the behavior of another, it is often in the form of an evaluation or judgment one attaches to the behavior. Much feedback is in the form of sharing evaluations or judgments one makes as a result of the behavior. Examples include:

"You are really a rigid, authoritarian person."

"I think you are a cold fish."

"I find you a very selfish person."

The sequence of feedback is illustrated in Figure 1.



If feedback is given at step 3, descriptive feedback may result. If feedback is given at step 4, it represents one's judgments. When people first try to give feeling descriptive feedback, it sometimes turns out like this: "Joe, when you push your ideas through at the meeting, I feel like you are a real dictator."

Even though the person uses the words "I feel like . . .," he really is expressing his evaluation of the behavior. A person feels angry, hostile, jealous, uneasy, affectionate, tender. At least there are words we use to try to describe the emotional state inside us. We don't feel like someone is a dictator. This is a result of our thinking processes and represents a judgment of the behavior one has experienced.

Evaluative feedback may be very important data to receive for it is sometimes difficult to know exactly why a person feels so upset unless we know how he has evaluated the behavior. There is apparently a connection between our feelings and our evaluations and knowing the evaluation is a key to understanding the feelings. If person A thinks that people who initiate often, talk a good deal and push for decisions are controlling, regulating, authoritarian types of people, he will resent such actions. Another person experiencing the same behavior will see such actions as helpful and facilitative. Thus a key to working out a relationship would be to understand person A's evaluation of the behavior.

#### DIRECT EXPRESSIVE

Feedback sometimes comes in the form of direct expressions of feeling about the total person. Examples would be:

"I distrust you."

It seems that people sometimes respond to the total person and have feelings that are generalized about the person as a total entity. When we think about this, the general statements are probably seldom if ever completely true. A per-

son who says "I like you," probably does not mean that he likes everything about the other person, just as a dislike reaction doesn't mean one dislikes everything about the other. However, these generalized feelings are important, for we probably experience and react quite differently to a person we have a general feeling of liking towards than to the person we have general dislike feelings towards.

If one is going to alter general negative feelings, it is probably important that he move the feedback into the more specific, descriptive area. He needs to know more concretely and specifically what he is doing that creates the negative reaction.

#### INTERPRETATIONS

An interesting, seductive, sometimes helpful, sometimes harmful, form of feedback is to share with a person an interpretation about the meaning of his behavior. If person A were B's superior and A experienced B as frequently questioning his instructions, disagreeing with his point of view and trying to find the flaws in his position and all this made A irritated and resentful, he might in the name of feedback give his interpretation of B's behavior in a manner something like this:

Mr. B, let me give you some feedback. I think you have a real hang-up around authority. You seem to be fighting me as an authority all the time. You ought to examine your past experiences to see if there isn't some authority relation you're still working out.

A could also have given B some direct descriptive feedback or his evaluations, but he used the interpretive form. It is immediately apparent that the interpretation may or may not have validity. It would take much more in-depth investigation of B to discover this. Most people are not trained well enough to give adequate interpretations of other's behavior and it is probably the person who is seen as an expert who gives his interpretation, who can be the most harmful. The person receiving the inter-

pretation may accept it as fact and this may leave him with anxieties and concerns that are not warranted.

Amateur psychoanalysis is a common action that develops in training groups and is almost a current fad. Many of us like to use our frames of reference that we have gleaned from different sources and out of these frameworks we give our interpretations. Following are some common interpretations we hear in groups:

"I think you have strong needs for approval."

"You seem to have deep seated defenses against expressions of love and warmth."

"I think you like to be mothered and protected."

These are difficult expressions to deal with. If a person rejects the interpretation, the giver may say or still feel that his interpretation is true, the other person just won't accept it, or it is too threatening or deeply rooted in his unconscious area.

The person giving an interpretation to another assumes a real responsibility. His interpretation may be wrong and yet the other person may assume it to be true and operate from that assumption. The solid data in the interpersonal world are our feelings about others. If we are connected with our feelings, we may know how we feel about the other person. This is different from interpreting his behavior.

#### NON-VERBAL

Data are often returned to the behavior in terms of non-verbal cues he picks up from others. We see people smile, frown, turn away, fidget, turn pale or livid, yawn, etc., as we interact with them. We see this as feedback about their reactions to us and some people are very sensitive to non-verbal cues, some insensitive, and others hypersensitive.

One must always interpret non-verbal feedback, for the meaning of the non-

verbal reaction may vary from person to person — in fact, between sender and receiver. When person A nods his head, he may mean that he has heard the message, but person B may interpret this as meaning agreement and support.

One person may frown and grimace when he is thoughtful or challenged by the ideas of another, but the other person may see this as a sign of rejection. Since non-verbal cues are open to interpretation, they should probably be checked out with the sender and feedback of a more specific type elicited.

### PERFORMANCE REACTIONS

Non-verbal cues as described above, are limited body cues that people give off in response to others. We can also receive certain performance cues that give us feedback about the effect of our behavior. The manager who finds a subordinate carrying out an assignment in a way quite the opposite from what the manager thought he said, is getting feedback that his instructions were not clear or at least were not understood as he intended.

Again, these performance cues are initial feedback indication that things may not be going as we intended. It gives support to moving the feedback process into a more intensive, descriptive level.

### INSTRUMENTED DATA COLLECTION

A feedback method that has long been employed by many organizations is the use of systematic data collection devices such as questionnaires, surveys, evaluation forms and interviews. There are advantages and disadvantages to these methods. The tabulated responses give the person a picture of the reactions of many people to him. A manager may be able to see that 10 of his 15 subordinates feel that he spends almost no time in sharing information about changes that occur in the organization. It is also possible to gather some feeling data about a person's performance. An example would be:

When I have a strong personal reaction to him, it is usually when:

- a. He makes me feel angry or dominated.
- b. He makes me feel involved and excited.
- c. He makes me feel guilty or ashamed.
- d. He makes me feel outmaneuvered or off balance.

Many volumes have been written on methods of data collection, survey research, interviewing, scale construction, etc. It is not appropriate to review all those here. It is important, however, that when instrumented methods are used that skill and care are used in developing valid and reliable procedures. However, regardless of the accuracy of the collected data, there is always a limitation to this form of feedback as a means of improvement. The data are often cold and impersonal and there is no real communication of the actual feelings involved. Just receiving the data does not connect the person receiving the data with the person or persons giving the data and does not allow the possibility of working through differences. This is always a possibility in direct face-to-face feedback sessions. Instrumented feedback is really just a beginning to start a process of working on resolving differences between people.

### FUNCTIONS OF FEEDBACK

The above formula describes various types of feedback that people often share with each other. A critical factor that influences the impact that the feedback has on the other person is the motivation of the person giving the data. A person giving feedback to someone should also examine not only his *method* but his *motivation*. The form may be correct but if the motivation is to punish or put-down the other person, the impact may not be positive. Following are some of the major reasons that people give feedback to others.

### TO PUNISH, HURT, OR PUT-DOWN

When we are angry, hurt or defensive, one way of responding to the person or

persons who have wounded us is to give feedback with the intent to "get even" or to hurt or wound as we have been hurt. Evaluative feedback is probably most often used in such cases but almost any type of feedback might be used. Examples:

"You are nothing but a snob and nobody I know likes you."

"You make me sick; I just can't stand working with you."

"I know how you have been trying to do a good job, but frankly you are just incompetent."

The same feedback could be given in differing tones of voice and quite different messages could be communicated. Consider: "Thanks a lot; that was really a helpful suggestion." This phrase could, by varying the inflection, either be used to praise and support, or to punish and put down. The person giving feedback should be aware of his own motivations and be willing to "own up" to his motives and not pretend one motivation set when other feelings are really prompting his behavior.

### TO REWARD AND SUPPORT

Supportive or rewarding feedback is important not only in reinforcing behaviors we want to persist in others, but in improving our relationships. Such feedback may also be just a spontaneous expression of good feeling toward another person. Examples would be:

"That was a great idea."

"When you supported my position, I really felt good and I appreciated it."

"I just want you to know that I like you and appreciate your work."

It would seem that such positive feedback would be most welcomed and people would want to hear such reactions. However, there are people who find it very difficult to share such feedback with others. There are also people who accept such feedback reluctantly and some are always suspicious of the motives of people who give them supportive data.

## TO HELP ANOTHER IMPROVE HIS PERFORMANCE

A common motivation stemming from current training programs is sharing of feedback data out of a desire to help another person improve his effectiveness in his interactions with others. Out of this motivation, the feedback could either be considered positive or negative but both are accepted because the person receiving the data feels that it is given in a spirit of helpfulness. One commonly hears a person in a training setting wanting to hear only the negative or critical feedback for he has confidence that the people are trying to be helpful. He wants to know those behaviors that are creating problems for him.

## TO IMPROVE ONE'S RELATIONSHIPS

Feedback can also be a means of opening up some areas of difficulties between persons and begin a process of

improving a relationship. Some examples would be:

"I've been worried about our relationship. I've felt you have been avoiding me and I would like to talk about it."

"John, I've noticed you have been disagreeing with me almost constantly and that really bothers me. What's going on between us?"

## CONSEQUENCES OF FEEDBACK

It should be recognized that just the giving of data in the form of feedback is no guarantee that conditions will improve. Feedback may result in people improving their relationships with each other or making an appropriate change in behavior or perceptions.<sup>1</sup> However, if people are not skilful or if they do not stay in the situation and deal with the consequences of the feedback, interpersonal situations may worsen.<sup>2</sup>

The ultimate consequence of feedback is to allow people to engage in a process of data sharing in such a way that greater effectiveness in interpersonal be-

havior results. Some types of feedback seem to facilitate adjustment, harmony, mutual acceptance more easily than other forms.

Different people may have developed a certain preference for one type of feedback. It may be important for them to see which forms they use and which forms are more useful. This article is an attempt to identify some of the major forms of feedback as a means of checking our own performance. The good training program to help people examine their own styles of feedback and to practice better forms, has not yet been developed.

## REFERENCES

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## FACULTY LOANS TO BLACK COLLEGES

A new program of business support to black colleges — the transfusion of teaching talent from corporation to campus — is underway at the International Business Machines Corporation.

Eighteen scientists, engineers and other volunteers from IBM's professional staff, on paid leaves from their regular jobs, are spending the current academic year teaching at 18 different black colleges in the South. Each participating college identified skill and curriculum needs last spring. These were matched with the abilities and experience of IBM volunteers and interviews were conducted on campus so that both school officials and volunteers could be reasonably assured of a good match.

"Black colleges can be aided immensely by the expertise of business professionals on their faculties and in their administrations," said Vernon E. Jordan, Jr., who left as director of United Negro College Fund on January 1 to head the Urban League. "This kind of sup-

port has been the special province of predominantly white schools for many years. I believe IBM's faculty loan program is a significant step in the right direction and hope other corporations will be challenged to develop similar efforts."

The IBM volunteers who interrupted their company careers for the academic year are teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in physics, mathematics, business, chemistry, computer science and engineering. The departments to which they are assigned generally have fewer than a half-dozen staff members. In many instances, the courses they are teaching are being offered for the first time because there is now someone available to teach them.

The impact of the volunteers on the campus often extends beyond the classroom. In addition to teaching, most of the volunteers are helping to develop new curricula, setting up new labs, conducting faculty seminars and working on interdepartmental study programs.