# The People Smart Leader

## Five Keys to Inspire Others to Do Their Best Work

**Lindiwe S. Lester**

Author of *The Everyday Leader*

| Chapter 7 |
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# Great Feedback Goes A Long Way

**Three topics for skillful, transformational feedback:**

1. Feedback is a powerful lever for growth.

2. Feedback anxiety; overcome it for the sake of your people.

3. Give feedback people can use: a method and when to use it.

This is probably a more crucial skill requirement than you might think. At least half of the leaders I have worked with required some attention to getting better with feedback to make progress on their goals. Several talked of being stumped about how to address a challenge with a staffer, colleague, or their leader. Eventually, I ask: *Have you shared the issue with them? Did you deliver it in the best way? Were you receptive to their feedback as well?*

They focused on giving, receiving, and expecting better results from feedback. As they improved their feedback practices, they described their troubling relationships improving. That can happen to you too.

We owe it to our people to offer quality feedback; but many of us avoid it, and our people dread it, having learned to fear it. That's because most of us are not particularly good at it, but we can be.

Feedback, closely related to *coaching*, has its own chapter because:

- It is a foundational skill that many leaders need to get more comfortable with and better at.

- There is not enough of it going around, and e*veryone needs and can benefit from regular, well-executed feedback.*

- People tend to think mostly of its "corrective" form, though affirming feedback is much better for inspiring growth.

Gallup reported that *only* 26% of employees rate their managers' feedback as helpful to how they do their work.[30]

**Feedback is information.** At work, it is information and observations that our staffers need to hear to enhance their work, skills, and behaviors. **And there are two types**:

1. *affirming* (positive, reinforcing, confirming what's working).

2. *corrective* (to address missteps for better future actions).

To deliver it well, use the coaching skills of clarifying the goal, two-way dialogue, inquiring about the situation, exploring alternatives, and listening attentively.

## FEEDBACK, A POWERFUL LEVER FOR GROWTH

To make a subtle distinction, coaching is seen as developmental and *forward-looking*, while feedback reflects on *past behaviors.* Is most of your feedback to staff affirming and reinforcing? It should be.

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[30] Wigert, B. and Dvorak, N., Feedback is not enough, gallup.com, May 16, 2019

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Feedback, offered regularly and with good intent, facilitates and accelerates learning and growth. It helps our staffers see things they might not see (blind spots), including positive attributes. They can become aware of and receive reinforcement for doing well on specific tasks or relationships, or they can gain insight into how they may have veered off track, missed a target or a critical step.

Look at these instances where value-adding feedback might have helped the employee direct their efforts better:

- ✓ A staffer works super hard only to find, after expending enormous amounts of energy, the leader had expected them to spend their time on other tasks. Withholding feedback can lead to frustration: *"Wow, if I had known I would have changed it rather than keep working the same way."*

- ✓ Employees have been tasked to do things for which they have not been trained or mentored, but they do their best only to hear they messed it up. Providing instruction and feedback along the way could have helped them.

- ✓ An employee did a stellar job on their project and never heard that their work outputs were exceptional and valued. This can have the effect of the employee not repeating those tasks believing they might not have been that important.

- ✓ A staffer gets frustrated and makes rude outbursts that undermine their public credibility. Without feedback to correct this pattern, they might continue self-sabotaging.

**Team members <u>need</u> and <u>want</u> to know whether they are making progress or just going through the motions.** They want to use their talents in the best way and correct patterns as they go. Feedback is a *contributory leader skill* in such cases. Valuable feedback is transformational, directional, even inspirational. A feedback-rich culture is a place in which people feel valued, supported, connected, purposeful and engaged.

## OVERCOME FEEDBACK ANXIETY

A first step in getting good at providing quality feedback is having the right mindset about its value. Many leaders suffer from *feedback avoidance* or have underdeveloped feedback muscles.

Beliefs about feedback (along with lack of skill) often play a role in this avoidance and anxiety. You may have residual feelings from times feedback you received or gave did not go well. Or you might anticipate people will react poorly to negative comments. (There are times when people will react emotionally since they may view it as overly critical and damaging to their self-worth. They and you get through it when you manage it with good intent and delivery.)

Our feedback anxieties and beliefs cause us to wait to provide it until things have gotten so bad that we feel— "I can't take it anymore." Others think positive feedback is unnecessary, believing a paycheck should be sufficient. Or you wait until a list of infractions builds up to make you bold enough and justified in providing it. Then others, afraid of the recipient's possible response, overtalk or over explain it to the point the feedback is obscured and useless. None are good

practices, since these make it likely that the feedback is carelessly planned and does not land well.

**Exercise: Feedback beliefs and intention.** Explore your thoughts about giving and receiving feedback.

1. How receptive are you to receiving, even encouraging, others to offer you feedback? (whether positive or corrective)?

2. What beliefs may be keeping you from giving *positive* feedback?

3. What attitude might be holding you back from giving more *corrective* feedback?

4. What, generally, are your intentions when giving feedback?

5. What is a recent situation in which you wanted to give better, more useful feedback?

6. Practice: Take the situation in question 5. Think about it and write how you might have provided it more effectively.

Think about micromanaging Janet, who does her next level leader's work, saying she can't trust him to do the work correctly. When I asked, Janet answered No to these questions: *Does Darold know how his job contributes to the department's goals? Does he know why you are doing his work? Does Darryl know what he needs to do or produce to meet the job needs and allay your anxieties?* Janet and I then talked about the value of feedback, how without it, she is doing a disservice to her team member and herself (through overwork). She worked to offer better feedback and saw progress in Darryl's work. She also regained time to focus on her own work.

*Your receptivity to it makes you a better feedback giver.* Creating a feedback-appreciative workplace happens when leaders model that personal growth is important and can happen through quality feedback. Peter, a school leader, who each year during the annual evaluation meeting with his direct reports, asks five questions.

***Peter's Top 5 Questions*** to garner feedback:

1. Are you hopeful?

2. What do you like or appreciate the most about working here?

3.  If you could change anything at our organization, what would it be?

4.  What would give you pause about renewing your contract (or staying with the organization) another year?

5.  What can I do to make it easier for you to work with me?

Their responses help him adapt his style and do more of what is working. Using this process might be a factor in why so many of his staffers stay on for years. With this practice along with his other feedback requests (e.g., about meeting quality or his decision-making), he has gotten better when offering corrective feedback that his people take to heart.

## HOW TO GIVE FEEDBACK PEOPLE CAN USE

Like coaching, feedback is a conversation in which performance information is offered with the **goal of leading to a better path forward**. Before looking at a process for feedback, keep these things in mind about *quality feedback*. It is:
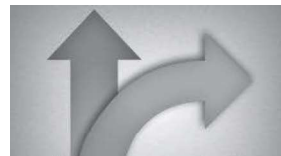
a.  Regular and with a greater proportion positive than corrective (think 5/1 positive to corrective ratio at minimum).

b.  Relevant, not trivial.

c.  Thoughtful and planned so it is received as well as possible.

d.  Grounded in "Why" it matters from the organizational perspective (not your personal one).

e. Almost always a two-way conversation between individuals who have established rapport. **It should feel like a dialogue between two adults**, not like a parent and child.

f. Not a prolonged emphasis on the past behavior (since the intent is to understand the past to find a better way forward).

g. Factual, not interpreted (avoids giving added meaning to the staffers' actual behavior or statements).

h. Specific (What, When, and the Impact).

i. Free of anxiety-producing language; maybe instead of saying "feedback," use *advice, suggestions, or improvements*.

j. Descriptive, not judgmental, related to behaviors that the person can act on.

k. Humane—the better the relationship, the greater receptivity.

l. Delivered in a few ways, depending on the situation: quick on the spot, direct, and as a fuller coaching-style conversation.

m. Timely (with consideration for the right timing and place. The more complex, the greater the need for privacy).

n. Unbiased, nonjudgmental, and well intentioned.

**Exercise: Check in.** Using the letters above (a-n), which of the factors do you need to think about the most? ____ ____ ___ ____ _____

Describe your experience with one of these factors._____
_____

_____

_____

Next, review how two feedback conversations broke down because the leader, as the feedback giver, used poor feedback practices.

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**Example #1: Leader interprets issue (see c, g, and n above)**

*Fact*: Jamie walked in and out of the meeting numerous times, missing some information needed for his job.

**Feedback with leader's assumptions and interpretation:** *"I am disappointed that you left the meeting. The information was really important for you to hear. I guess you don't care about the work very much. It makes me wonder whether you are serious."* (Note how the leader climbs the Ladder of Inference, see page 72.)

Jamie: *"Wow. Here I was trying to be in the meeting as much as I could even though my daughter's school called to say she had an accident and had been rushed to the hospital."*

Confidence and trust between them eroded a bit because the leader did not *ask* why Jamie was leaving the meeting. The leader could have shown empathy and let Jamie decide to get the information.

**Example #2:**

*Fact***:** Alyssa fell short of her goal of raising enough sponsorship dollars to cover the costs of the special event.

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Leader: *"Alyssa I'm not sure you have what it takes for this job. You missed the fundraising goal and caused everyone headaches. Maybe you don't have the drive or commitment. I'm going to give you one last chance, if you can't get it done, I will try someone else."*

Alyssa: *"I worked as hard as I could on this without much help. I asked for a previous donor list but never received it. I never said I had fundraising experience but wanted to help the organization by volunteering to do this. I thought I would get support. I worked 60 hours a week on this. I'm really stressed out."*

Result: Alyssa is deflated, and the leader has decreased confidence in her.... Unnecessarily, right?

**Your thoughts:**

What went well in example 2? _____

_____

How did the feedback approach probably make it harder to receive?

_____

_____

The leader might have said: *"Alyssa, you fell short of the fundraising goals. How do you feel about it? What do you think were the causes? What can you learn going forward? How can I better support you? What are your next steps to ensure greater success next time?"*

**A feedback method.** Next is a process to offer better feedback with suggested activities and thought processes that take place **before, during and after the feedback.**

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The descriptions of *before, during and after* that follow are useful whether the feedback you are giving is during a planned meeting or on-the-spot. Until you get more natural providing it, consider the entire process, despite the time period you have. The level of detail depends on the feedback type, time, and setting. If the feedback is tough, consider the items carefully to ensure the best reception.

**Before**

- **Clarify the issue in your mind** (Is it worth addressing? If so, why? What is the specific issue? How does it impact the organization?
- **Set your mindset.** (Am I ready to be fully present, open, and to actively listen? Can I affirm it i**s** not a personal peeve? Is it an issue I believe can be resolved? Am I able to treat this person as an adult and not like a child?)
- **Set intent for the interaction.** What is the result I hope for when offering the feedback?
- **Visualize success:** What does a successful feedback session look like? Mentally rehearse how you will help it be received well.
- **Determine safe space:** Ensure you choose the right time and place.
- **Embrace a solution orientation**: I'm ready to spend most of our time on solutions, not dwelling on the errors (if it's corrective).

**During**

- **Establish rapport quickly.**

- **Begin the feedback** (either direct [see notes on next pages] or as a coaching conversation inquiring about their view of the situation). *"I'd like us to talk about the recent issue with xx or about xxxx."* (Be clear and specific.)
- **Ensure shared understanding of the issue** (what, when, where... factual and both of you are on the same page on the facts).
- **Share why it matters to the work** (i.e., the impact of their behavior; it's not about their personality).
- **Brainstorm solutions.** "*What ideas do you have on how to get to a better outcome when this type of situation arises in the future?*"
- **Agree on the actions to be taken and timelines**. "Let's agree on how you will move forward on this issue and set some timelines."
- **Determine what support is neccesary to move forward** (from you and elsewhere).

- *Summarize and Close.*

**After**

- **Follow up periodically** on the actions.
- **Provide any needed support** and encouragement as they implement and carry out the feedback actions.

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- **Offer thoughts on the impact of the changes**. Acknowledge when and what progress has taken place.

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## A feedback meeting example

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| <br><br><br><br><br>Feedback<br>Conversation | *"I'd like to get your thoughts on how the project is going, and then, I'd like to share some suggestions and get your reactions to it."*<br><br>Sample conversation questions:<br><br> *Can you review the project goals?*<br><br>*What's worked well?*<br><br>*Where did you get stuck (if at all)?*<br><br>*What are you thinking about doing differently?*<br><br>*Here are a few thoughts on what I observed… (share what went well and what can be improved). Any reactions? (Listen to understand before responding).*<br><br>*So, what will you do to move forward on the project to help ensure its success?*<br><br>*In what ways do you need my support?*<br><br>*Thanks for your time and I look forward to seeing the needed progress on the project.* |

 Whether affirming or corrective, feedback should lead to agreed up actions to continue or start doing. *What can you/we do to improve*

*our chance of success in similar situations? How can you prepare to do this well in the future?*

**On-the-spot quick feedback.** On the spot feedback is just that— in the moment without much planning. Beware of using it when the situation is not conducive to high receptivity.

Here are some thoughts on the conditions for offering the best on-the-spot feedback:

1. when you have an existing trusting relationship,

2. it is useful feedback (but not earth shattering),

3. it is not new or shocking,

4. it is not a personal issue with you, and, or

5. it is not particularly challenging feedback nor hard for the person to receive and change.
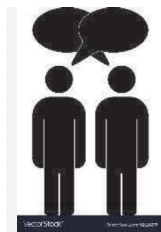
| Quick Feedback | **Example 1:** *Lanita, the way you handled the facilitation of the meeting was particularly good. Your organization, how you engaged everyone with good questions, and your wrap up with next steps were good. I look forward to more of that. Thanks.* **Example 2:** *Daryl, when you arrived late again for the monthly meeting, I decided to give you this feedback before it sets in as a pattern. It disrupts the meeting, and you miss critical information. Please make sure you arrive on time for our monthly meetings. Do you need anything to make that happen?* |
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**When *direct* feedback is better than a conversation.**

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As we get better at providing feedback, we learn to distinguish "how" we provide it- using a feedback conversation or by being directive. Some cases where direct feedback ("just say it") would be fine.

- Time is limited, a good rapport exists, and it is important.

- Conversations in which the staffer tends to be evasive, rationalizes behavior constantly, or has low self-awareness. If the feedback is critical, you may need to provide it directly.

- When performance expectations are non-negotiable. Tell them directly, then prompt them to share what support they will need to accomplish the tasks.

**Exercise: Two real work feedback applications**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***A. Think of a real work situation where providing positive feedback is warranted.*** | | |
| 1. | Who needs the feedback? | |
| 2. | What is the specific affirming feedback? | |
| 3. | Why does it matter for the work or the organization? | |
| 4. | When and where will you offer it? | |
| 1. | What is the mutually beneficial outcome you want from the feedback? | |

5.   Other considerations?

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**B. Now think about a real work situation where corrective feedback is warranted.**

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| | |
|---|---|
| 2.   Who needs the feedback? | |
| 3.   What is the specific corrective feedback about? | |
| 4.   What is the impact for work/organization? | |
| 5.   When and where will you provide this feedback? | |
| 6.   How will you keep it a two-way, productive conversation? | |
| 7.   What is the mutually beneficial outcome you want from the feedback? | |

**Deliver the feedback then reflect here:** After planning and delivering the above feedback, complete this worksheet[31]:

| | What worked? | What to improve next time |
|---|---|---|
| **Process** | | |
| Planning the feedback | | |
| Engaging in the feedback | | |
| Sharing thoughts about the key issues | | |

[31] Adapted from p. 52, Harvard Business Review Press, Giving Effective Feedback, 20 Minute Manager, 2014

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Listening | | |
| Creating action plan | | |
| **Relationship** | | |
| Communication quality | | |
| Staffers' reaction | | |
| Level of mutual respect | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Results** | | |
| Progress on changes/actions | | |
| Impact of the change | | |

Keep practicing. We all can get better in this area.

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This closes the COACH Key, chapters 6 and 7.  Before moving to the DEVELOP Key, take time to affirm your readiness to use coaching-style leadership to enable your team to deliver their best work.

**Make Coaching a Reflexive Practice,** becoming unconsciously competent (i.e., you do not have to think about it; it's natural).

**Exercise: Five affirming habits.** Place a check in the circles of the ones where you can say a definite YES.

❍ I recognize the benefits of shifting from constant bossing (telling) to two-way coaching conversations to enable growth.

❍ I am confident behavior change can happen, and I know it requires more than one conversation So, I will recognize incremental growth.

❍ I aim for all my feedback to be about behavior, not the person, and tied to the impact on the work and organization.

❍ I build positive rapport with my team members in an ongoing way, allowing for better receptivity to coaching and feedback.

❍ I commit to offer ongoing feedback, with much more positive than corrective. I am unafraid of offering both.