ZENGER | FOLKMAN

Turning Feedback Into Change

by Joe Folkman

Turning Feedback Into Change

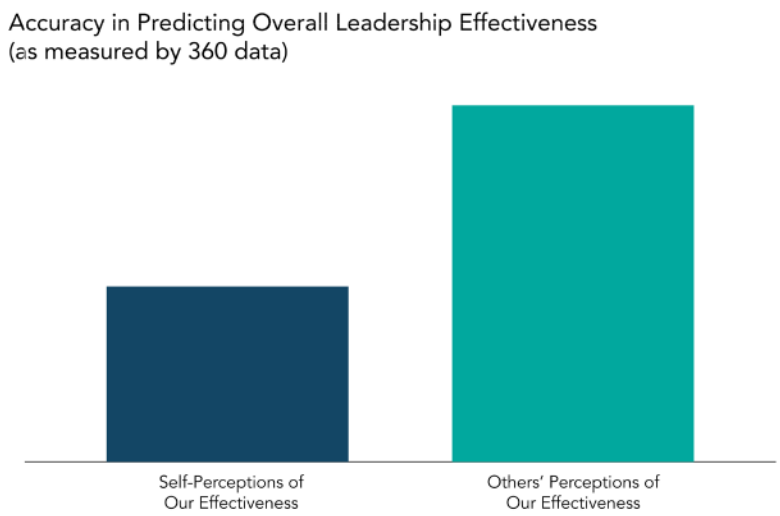
The three elements that help leaders accept feedback from others and turn that feedback into change.

In a recent training session, I noticed that one of the attendees appeared to be disappointed in the feedback from his manager, peers, and direct reports. I gave him 15 minutes to digest his feedback before approaching him and asking him if his feedback was making sense. He looked up, shook his head, and said, “I just wish I got credit for my intentions.” He went on to explain that his intentions were to please his manager, satisfy his peers, and lead his direct reports, but his feedback made it clear that his raters reacted to what they experienced, not his intentions. After another 15 minutes he had another thought, “The only thing worse than this negative feedback would be to not have any feedback at all. At least I know what is going on.”

I am convinced from my years of research that one of the keys to personal success is having the ability to accept feedback from others and turn that feedback into change. But what is the

© 2019 Zenger Folkman

Fig. 1 – Accuracy in Predicting Overall Leadership Effectiveness



"secret sauce" for turning feedback into real personal and professional change?

You're not the best person to determine your effectiveness—other people are. While any single individual may or may not be correct in their opinions, averaged feedback from a variety of other people is incredibly accurate, honest, and true. In fact, it correlates to bottom line results in terms of effectiveness when dealing with other people. Why is this a big secret? For most people, they believe their opinion to be right and the opinion of others to be wrong.

Others Know Us Best

My colleague Jack Zenger and I recently did a study to determine how accurately a person could predict their strengths and weaknesses, as opposed to others. The results showed that other people were twice as accurate at predicting strengths and weaknesses as the individual. Individuals are either more generous or more humble and conservative than they should be when rating themselves. Either way, other people's accuracy is significantly higher than the individual's, and the feedback from others is very valid and accurate.

Feedback is essential for development

Everyone has blind spots. There are certain characteristics most individuals just don't see. Sometimes these characteristics are weaknesses. Many people may see and know about them, but don't think they make much difference. In fact, they don't even realize that people notice them. Often, there are also strengths—things they do incredibly well—but they don't realize the leverage and power they possess. Feedback is the most instructive tool to help individuals understand others' perceptions of themselves—and there is significant power in that process.

Model for turning feedback into change

To turn feedback into change, Zenger Folkman recommends using a model consisting of three elements.

1. First is Acceptance. People will only change if they believe the feedback

they've been given. The classic example is an alcoholic whose spouse tells them, "You have a drinking problem." They may reply, "No, it's not really that bad. I don't have a problem." Then their employer notices the drinking problem. They reply again, "It's not a problem." If the behavior is not changed, they may eventually become divorced and lose their job. Once they've lost everything, the realization may hit: "I think I have a problem." That moment is when their change can begin. It happens when they accept the feedback and begin to change.

2. The second part of the model is about Prioritization. Do you have more to do than you can get done in a day? Are you a little bit overwhelmed in your life? Are you a little frustrated by the number of things you have time to do? Typically, everyone can answer "Yes" to all three questions. As people think about change, they often are overwhelmed. The reality is they're not going to change everything, and the good news is they don't have to. Our research shows that while great leaders are great at a few things, they also have weaknesses. In other words, leaders don't have to be perfect. All they need to do is figure out what they are good at and then prioritize their development efforts by determining what they need to be exceptionally good at.

3. The third part of the model is where the rubber hits the road. I call it Making Change Happen.

Improving the probability of acceptance

Sometimes the feedback we receive can be quite blunt or negative. When this happens, I frequently hear leaders say things like, "I've heard that before, but I didn't think it was that important, so I didn't do anything about it," or, "I wasn't motivated." Why does this attitude prevail so often? Gene Dalton, a Harvard professor, conducted a fundamental research project on change and came to the conclusion that unless people feel a need to change, they will not change.

The first goal, therefore, is to gain the desire to change. Here are five fundamental ways to do just that.

1. Complete Honesty

Complete honesty is the number one skill necessary for accepting feedback. Many people would never tell a lie to another person, but they lie to themselves all the time. The truth hurts and they are afraid of it. The ability to receive feedback, be honest with themselves, and accept the feedback as a tool to help them grow are key characteristics.

2. Concern for Others

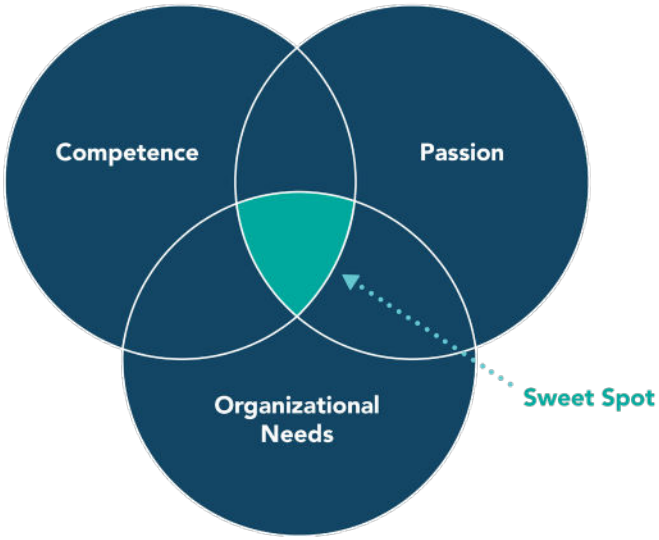
If individuals don't care about the person giving feedback, they probably won't care about the feedback they receive.

3. Valuing Differences

There are people that believe and value the feedback from others who are in the same occupation, or have the same gender or race, but will not accept feedback from people who are different. If a person can see the value in differences, they will be more likely to accept feedback from others.

© 2019 Zenger Folkman

Fig. 2 – CPO Model



4. Optimism

If one doesn't think they can do anything with the feedback to change, they will have a hard time accepting it. Remember, people can change.

5. Listening to Learn

Listen to learn, as opposed to listening to form an argument or listening to pretend you care. If a person will listen to learn and really understand where the person giving feedback is coming from and why their belief is different, their ability to accept feedback will increase substantially.

Prioritizing your development

The research Zenger Folkman has done reveals that making a substantial change on just one competency or behavior will make a great difference in a person's development. If people can go from no strengths to possessing just one profound strength, their overall leadership effectiveness will increase from the 34th to the 64th percentile. They gain 30 percentile points just from doing one thing well! Taking feedback and focusing one's efforts on a few things is beneficial, but it is essential to choose the right things to focus on.

How does one know which issue is going to have the biggest impact? That's where the CPO Model comes into play. There are three elements to this model: competence, passion, and organizational needs.

1. Competence

When looking at data, try to understand the impact of "fatal flaws" and strengths. A fatal flaw is a competency at the 10th percentile. In other words, it is something you are really bad at. Fortunately, only 30 percent of the population has them. But if a person has one or more fatal flaws, their average effectiveness rating is usually at the 18th percentile. This flaw can cancel out all the good things that a person does. If an individual has a fatal flaw, their first priority is to fix it. It doesn't need to be a profound strength, but they do need to get it out of the fatal flaw zone.

2. Passion

People often ask, "Which competency should I choose to work on?" My answer is always the same: "I don't know." I can look at the data and determine which competencies are strengths and which are weaknesses, but I can't tell you what

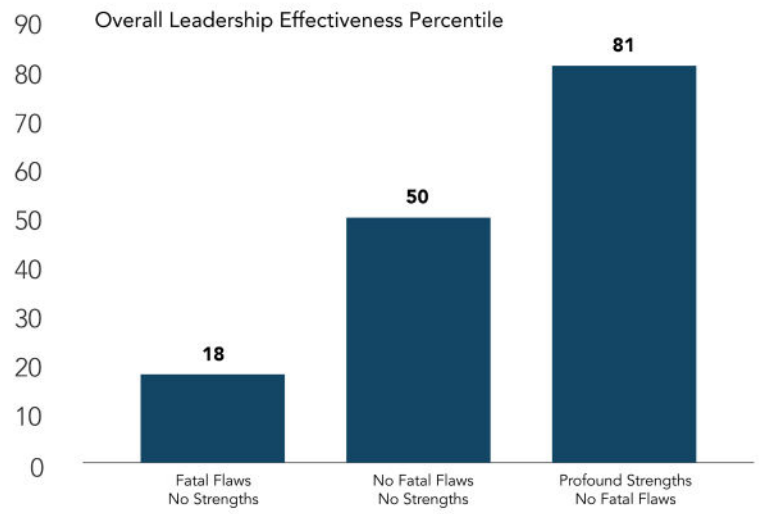
you are passionate about. A key ingredient to the formula of change is passion. If a person can work on something they love and something they are really interested in, the probability of improvement goes up substantially.

3. Organizational Needs

What competency or capability would make a big difference in an individual's ability to be successful in their current job? The preoccupation with weakness often gets people to focus on things that aren't as useful. Instead, a person should consider what will help them be the most successful in their job. A lot of people have the desire to be promoted. The key to promotion is doing a great job where you are right now.

These are the three important elements people should use to prioritize what to work on. The intersection between these three becomes one's development "sweet spot." If they can find behaviors in that "sweet spot" area, their ability to change those behaviors goes up substantially.

Fig. 3 – Impact of Fatal Flaws and Profound Strengths



Making change happen

The third part of the change model is making change happen. There are a variety of levers to help facilitate change.

1. Find the Real Problem

People often get feedback that is difficult to understand, such as, "You're a jerk," or, "You just don't care." No one knows where to start on those kinds of issues. It is hard to know what to do. Until one gets clarity about why people think they're "a jerk" and what they are doing to cause that belief, they can't do anything about it. Start by finding the real problem.

2. Move Toward Specific Goals

When people begin the change process, they will usually get feedback that describes broad areas for development, such as "be a better communicator," or, "be more open." None of these give insight into what they specifically need to change. In order to really change an issue, they need to move from a general idea to a very specific understanding of the behavior to improve. They can start by

© 2019 Zenger Folkman

asking themselves probing questions to determine the specific meaning of broad generalizations. The more specific they can get their area of development—by finding the what, where, when, why, and how—the better off they will be in being able to change it.

3. Build a Support System

When people start a change process, they often hide and don't let other people know they are working on changing. Our research is very clear. People who share their action plan and enlist the help of others have a significantly higher probability of improving.

4. Try It, You'll Like It (Eventually)

As people start a new behavior, they usually are not very good at it. In fact, most often they are awful. Doing something new is always hard and requires a great deal of effort. However, after persisting in that effort, they eventually develop some confidence. The effort lessens and the behavior becomes a habit. When the behavior isn't so hard and difficult to do, they will become better at doing it naturally.

5. Don't Get Trapped by Beliefs

Everyone forms theories and beliefs about different things, different people, and why things are the way they are. These beliefs come out of their experience. They may not all be correct. Sometimes people really need to challenge their basic assumptions about why things are the way they are.

6. Avoid Feeling Deprived

As soon as someone starts to diet and decides that they are not going to have a particular food, it's usually the only thing they want. When people feel deprived, it's all they focus on because it causes them to obsess about something. A great trick for change is to focus on the benefits of the new behavior as opposed to the deprivation. People should not think about what they can't do, but rather, think about what they are going to do and why that's going to be better.

7. Create Structure

There are helpful structures that can help us to change. People often choose the most difficult things to change and require the use of helpful structures to facilitate that change. Planners or schedulers, meetings, project plans with milestones, coaches, and systems are all structures that will help people change.

8. Have a Clear Vision

As people think about and evaluate their vision, it becomes clearer and they have a better sense of what they want to accomplish and how to do it. When responding to feedback, people often set a goal but don't have vision. They don't have clarity about what they want to do, how it's going to feel, and how they're going to be different. If people will do things such as select a role model, envision how they are going to change, and visualize how people will perceive their change, it will be easier to succeed.

Next steps for change

The first step on a person's path to change is to ask for feedback from others. I find that this is an uncommon behavior. There are lots of people that go through life never asking for feedback. When people ask for feedback, sometimes it is something they don't want to hear. However, how they react to the feedback is

critical—don't kill the messengers. When you do this, you will never get honest feedback again. The words to say are, "I appreciate that feedback—tell me more." If you don't understand it, say, "Help me understand that." Be aware that others tend to tell people what they want to hear. Individuals should thank others for giving honest feedback and, as you thank and reward people, they tend to give feedback more often. Encourage feedback from a variety of people—diversity is important. Involve others in your development and share your plans and goals. Some of the best feedback a person can receive is through a 360-degree assessment. The 360-degree process allows you compare feedback across multiple groups you interact with. The anonymity also facilitates honest and candid feedback. The key to improving personal success is by turning feedback into change.

The 360-degree process allows you compare feedback across multiple groups you interact with. The anonymity also facilitates honest and candid feedback.

© 2019 Zenger Folkman

About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.