

Superior to Subordinate Feedback: Effectiveness & Techniques for Improvement

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### Abstract

The ability to properly receive feedback is a key part of bettering oneself and obtaining success in whatever endeavor you embark on in life. Whether it is on a specific task, or larger goals, feedback acceptance is crucial to maintaining accelerated progress. But there are many factors which play a part of the feedback process. Who is it delivered by? How did they deliver it? Does a difference in status between the person delivering the feedback vs. the recipient effect effectiveness? What are the personality characteristics of the person receiving the feedback? Do how they receive feedback have a dramatic effect of the delivery of future feedback? These are all crucial questions that need further exploration to help provide clarity to the feedback process. This is an interdisciplinary study across multiple fields to find universal commonalities within the feedback process.

*Keywords:* Feedback, Supervisor, Subordinate, Manager, Teacher, Coach, Student, Development, Recognition, Emotional Backwash, Agreeable, Non-Verifying

### Feedback: Effectiveness & Techniques for Improvement

In today's modern world we see diversity everywhere. Since the birth of the internet... information, ideas, and opinions are now both accessible and shared instantaneously across the globe. Not only have people descended from across the world to pursue common goals, but they have also brought their beliefs, values, and traditions with them. Additionally, everyone has their own life experiences. These experiences create personality traits which further define their interactions with other people. As a manager, teacher, coach, or any other person in a supervisory role, those are the wide range of individuals that make up groups that a leader must lead.

In the past, leading groups would be driven mostly by the personality of the individual in charge. In this instance, a boss or coach would be able to have a "my way or the highway" approach to the people they oversee. As the world has changed throughout the years, so has the style of leadership to stay effective. More than ever, leaders have become the ones who need to adapt to their diverse teams. The roles have now been reversed. To get the best performance out of individuals, leaders need to tailor their interactions with people they lead on an individual basis. So, while some people are motivated by public praise, this might demotivate someone who does not feel comfortable in the spotlight. At the same time, you can have three people with similar goals, but one is a visual learner, the second is an auditory learner, and the third is a tactile learner. The learning process for all three might look completely different. Someone might just need a short explanation on why things are done a certain way while another could use a quick exercise of authority to keep them on the right track. As we can see, there are many challenges for the modern leader which require them to be highly adaptable while at the same time, treating everyone equally and giving them the same common goal through consistent communication.

For the past 10 years I have been managing and overseeing teams of people. While working for different retailers, their goals and vision were different but the path to reach them were generally the same. Being successful at the operations of the job is necessary, and you can never reach that success without all of the individuals working at the best of their ability. At my core I am extremely interested in human behavior and how we interact with each other. The variances in our interactions are intriguing and I find myself constantly having an internal dialogue as to why we do (either conscious or unconscious) the things we do while interacting with each other. The longer I am in the management field, the more I realize how important it is to constantly give feedback to the variety of people subordinate to me. This includes different ages, sexes, social status, and personalities. Unfortunately, not everyone is welcome and receptive to feedback. Some take it as criticism, but other appreciate my observations and work towards applying them towards their future tasks. I also have the responsibility of ensuring that other managers are giving productive feedback to the people they oversee. I find that it adds an extra challenge of encouraging them to give proper feedback to others. Managers can be uncomfortable with confrontation or worried about demotivating the team. This is something that they need to see past and understand the implications of avoiding conversations. Inherently, I believe that my main drive with managing people is developing and fostering their journey of self-improvement. I truly believe that in the end it is up to the individual to accept feedback properly, maintain their own self developed goals, and find the path to whatever success they seek. To help facilitate this you must then as a leader ask, what factors influence how effective feedback is applied in supervisor to subordinate communication, and based upon these findings, what techniques can lead to an increase in the overall effectiveness of the feedback process?

As pointed out, one of the most crucial components to increasing performance and competence within teams is having effective feedback between individuals in a supervisory role and the subordinates they oversee. The modern narrative has been on self-identity and on individualistic ideals. This parallels with a level of skepticism and disdain of authority which exceeds that of Generation X. The “pave your own path” mentality has led to a greater level of non-acceptance of feedback from superiors. This occurs in the workplace among all levels of management. While I understand and can appreciate the need to be an individual, but this mentality has inadvertently also led the challenging of well know and documented successful workplace practices. To put it bluntly, there are a lot of people who simply want to “reinvent the wheel”. How do we give feedback that can be trusted, respected, and incorporated into a persons’ work ethics?

To increase the effectiveness of the feedback given to an individual, we must first study how people react to and receive feedback. If we can better understand these reactions, we can then apply these findings towards future communication. This is a question that has many moving parts, so added variables like negative (corrective) and supervisory feedback help narrow the scope of this research. There are common responses to feedback that need to be initially looked at. A study of an operational developmental assessment center showed that people will generally be more willing to accept feedback when it is positive. In this same study, it was found that being agreeable means that you are more willing to take feedback. (Bell & Arthur Jr., 2008) We also look at the successful techniques for feedback delivery. It was found that students rated specific feedback more positively than they rated vague feedback. (Liden & Mitchell , 1985) While these findings can be perceived as common-sense knowledge, other more specific studies have shown revealing results. As an added variable, the status of the feedback giver can affect

how feedback is processed, received, and applied. Going back to the research done the operational developmental assessment center, it found that higher feedback acceptance was associated with higher assessor ratings. (Bell & Arthur Jr., 2008) This was also affirmed by a work simulation where it was found that, “The more the worker positively evaluated the manager, the more the worker reported feeling good for non-verifying feedback that was overly positive or overly negative” (Stets & Asencio , 2008) This reveals that it is easier to receive feedback from someone who is shown as effective in their field. Another pending question is whether feedback always leads to positive results? If not, can it stifle productivity? As study into fast food workers documented that “If dealing with highly routine tasks which are being performed by well-trained employees, feedback may not provide the simple tool for performance enhancement that has been commonly espoused, but may actually be detrimental to performance.” (Waldersee & Luthans , 1994) This proves to be very revealing and leads to other situational questions. For example, is feedback response different when it is sought out by the recipient? In a study of undergraduates studying French language it was found that people seek positive feedback when first starting out a task and/or job but as experience is gained, seek negative feedback to continue development of skills. (Finkelstein & Fishbach , 2012) So, does the timing of feedback effect its effectiveness? Students were observed in a new process where they can view teachers & professors grading their submissions during the mark up process. The effectiveness was very positive as students were attentive and engaged in their feedback compared to previously mostly being concerned with their grade. (Jones, Georghiades , & Gunson , 2012) This continues with the discussion about the recipient’s personality and mental state. How does one’s emotional stability affect how feedback is received? A simulation on people from the Netherlands discovered that in response to negative feedback more emotionally unstable individuals

experienced more anger. (Niemann , Wisse , Rus , Van Yperen , & Sassenberg, 2014) As we can see, there is a lot of seemingly unrelated data which when put together, can help paint a picture of possible successful feedback techniques.

For a feedback giver, the goal is to simplify the process while keeping it effective and tailoring to individuals. In a study on student's reactions to grades, findings show that educating people on the feedback process, which would lead them to be more feedback literate, could lead to much more effective application of received feedback. (Pitt & Norton , 2017) This collaborates the book, *Thanks for the feedback: The science and art of receiving feedback* which argues that educating receivers of feedback yields greater results compared to developing the feedback givers themselves. (Stone & Heen, 2015) While this is just one part of the puzzle, there are carefully crafted solutions which try to encompass the whole feedback spectrum. One example is the leadership system *Situational Leadership II*, where a leader's feedback style adapts to the development level an individual is currently at for a certain goal or task. (Blanchard, 2001) The findings discussed coincide with known leadership programs which are successful solutions for feedback delivery. A deeper dive into the individual study's results to find possible techniques will better help leaders of all types deliver more effective feedback. This will verify and add to the already existing techniques and programs based upon the research completed. The target audience for this paper is anyone in a leadership role that is in the position of giving feedback to people subordinate to them. This would include managers, teachers, coaches, and other supervisory roles. The goal is for these leaders to be able to look at and understand the scientific data that arises from the feedback process and use that information to help drive more effective interactions within their organization. It gives them the power to think

before taking action and methodically choose how feedback is given to people based upon real world studies and findings. This can only result in more efficient and successful feedback.

### Feedback Recipient

#### Agreeable & Non-Agreeable

When looking at the feedback process, it is important to clarify that there are two individual parties involved. This would be the feedback recipient and the giver. First to be discussed is the variances that can affect the recipient. In the study *Feedback Acceptance in Developmental Assessment Centers: The Role of Feedback Message, Participant Personality, and Affective Response to the Feedback Session*, feedback acceptance by over one hundred participants was studied in an operational developmental assessment center. The results showed that higher feedback acceptance was associated with higher assessor ratings. Also, there was a strong relationship between affective reaction and feedback acceptance for highly agreeable participants.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between assessor ratings, participant self-ratings, personality variables, and feedback reactions

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Assessor ratings	141	3.21	0.63	—					
2. Participant self-ratings	129	3.87	0.38	0.35**	—				
3. Extraversion	141	117.61	23.57	0.15	0.39**	—			
4. Emotional stability	141	102.76	21.51	0.12	0.15	0.06	—		
5. Agreeableness	141	139.09	15.74	0.01	0.15	0.14	0.22**	—	
6. Affective reaction	130	4.02	0.60	0.37**	0.29**	0.31**	-0.03	0.16	—
7. Feedback acceptance	130	3.73	0.73	0.30**	0.25**	0.19*	0.00	0.11	0.41**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ . two-tailed significance tests.



These findings are important as they reinforce the idea that people are generally more willing to accept feedback when it is positive. Also, being agreeable means that you are more willing to take feedback.

One of the concerns of the study is that people with high agreeability might seem to take the feedback better but may not apply it as efficiently. This study serves as an excellent starting point towards to overall theme of this paper. "Participants' extraversion and agreeableness were also related to feedback acceptance, suggesting that assessors should consider tailoring the feedback session based on the participant's personality in order to maximize feedback acceptance" (Bell & Arthur Jr., 2008) Not only do they discuss how people react to feedback and how their performance can be positively affected, but also the implication that adapting the delivery methods based upon the receiver's traits will increase overall effectiveness.

### **Emotional Stability**

An individual's emotional stability is a trait that play a big part in how feedback is received and processed. In the research done by Niemann, Wisse, Rus, Van Yperen, & Sassenberg, two experiments were conducted where it was explored whether people's negating responses to feedback are grounded in their emotional instability, and if this effect is stronger for those who hold more power. The findings from the first study showed that in response to negative feedback more emotionally unstable individuals experienced more anger. I can relate to this based upon my years of experience giving feedback to staff within my organization. There is usually one or two people at each workplace where people are anxious to give feedback. The reason is that these individuals are the more emotionally unstable members of the team. Due to this, they initially do not receive feedback well at all. It is usually taken personally and in

retaliation, turns into projection back onto the supervisor or other members of their team. Fortunately, from the study comes some insight on how to counter this reaction. According to the results in *Anger and attitudinal reactions to negative feedback: The effects of emotional instability and power*, “Our findings show that if feedback providers can manage to attenuate feelings of power in emotionally unstable feedback receivers and instead evoke feelings social equality, these receivers will be less likely to give free rein to their unstable personality and thus will be less likely to react unfavorably to negative feedback.” (Niemann , Wisse , Rus , Van Yperen , & Sassenberg, 2014) I have used this technique before to help calm the feeling that as a supervisor, that I do not know what someone is feeling or going through. It is usually most impactful to tell a story of personal struggle and growth. People tend to see you as you currently are, not as you once were. It goes a long way to remind them that they only know the version of you that stands before them, not the version that used to be. Obviously, the goal of minimizing anger can help make any conversation go smoother, but does this really help how the feedback is applied?

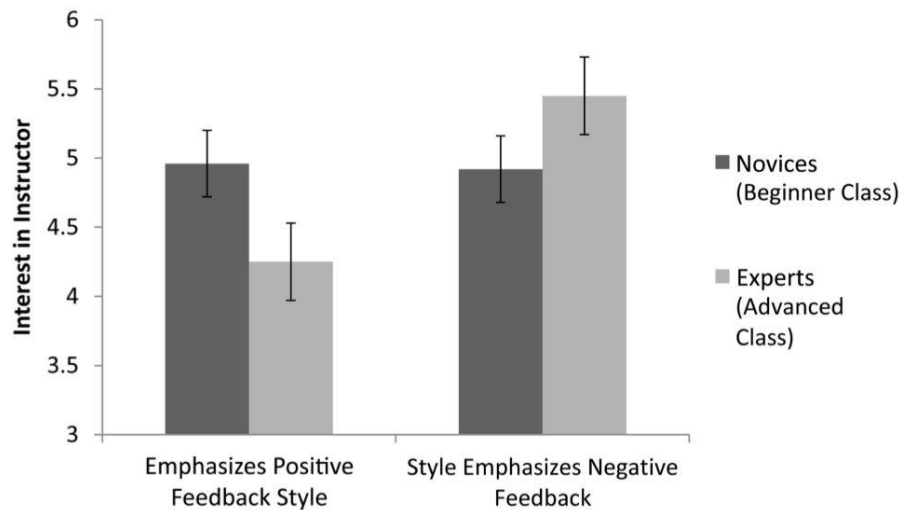
In a related study, fourteen final year undergraduates reflected on their perceptions of feedback written on marked assignments. They selected examples of what they considered to be either ‘good’ and ‘bad’ work. The findings suggest that emotional reactions play a significant part in determining how students will act on the feedback they receive. (Pitt & Norton , 2017) In this same study, the phrase “emotional backwash” was termed. This was derived from the emotional stability of the participants and is directly related to the emotional maturity of the feedback recipients. These combined findings show that if we can increase recipient’s emotional maturity in order to reduce this “emotional backwash” then we can minimize the possible negative effect that emotional instability has on the feedback process.

**Status**

Feedback effectiveness is situational dependent on the kind of work being performed. In an article by Finkelstein & Fishbach, they explore what feedback people seek and how they respond to said feedback. Based upon the findings, it is presented that people seek positive feedback when first starting out a job or task, but as experience is gained, seek negative feedback to continue their development of skills.

“novices are more likely than experts to seek positive feedback on their strengths and alter their behaviors and attitudes when they get such feedback, whereas experts are more likely than novices to seek negative feedback on their weaknesses and alter their behaviors and attitudes when they get this feedback.” (Finkelstein & Fishbach , 2012)

INTEREST IN FEEDBACK FROM AN INSTRUCTOR WHO EMPHASIZES POSITIVE VERSUS NEGATIVE FEEDBACK AS A FUNCTION OF EXPERTISE LEVEL (STUDY 1)



*Finkelstein & Fishbach , 2012*

These observations are very important as they make a distinction between an individual’s personality and their emotional maturity. From my own experience, many people starting off in a

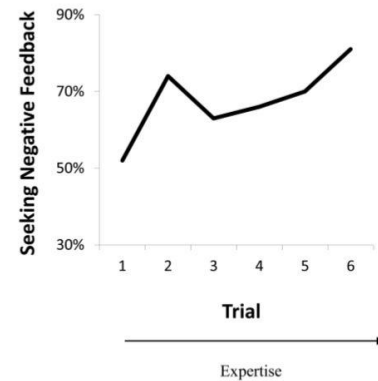
new job or position look for positive reinforcement to stay motivated and prove their value in their new environment. As time goes on, and people become confident in their field, they then have the confidence not only to take, but seek criticism which may be critical. With this they can continue to progress their skills and talent. As discovered so far when it comes to feedback, everything can be situational.

In a previous study written in 1994, Waldersee & Luthans observed over one hundred employees from eleven fast food restaurants who perform highly routine tasks. The effects of positive versus corrective feedback was tested. Results showed that positive feedback did not improve performance and instead, that the control group improved significantly more than the positive feedback group.

“The major implication that this study has for the practitioner is the need to be aware of possible limitations in the effectiveness of feedback. If dealing with highly routine tasks which are being performed by well-trained employees, feedback may not provide the simple tool for performance enhancement that has been commonly espoused, but may actually be detrimental to performance.” (Waldersee & Luthans , 1994)

While this may seem contradictory to previously discussed findings, it is just another branch off the feedback tree. This leads to a discussion of motivation vs. corrective feedback which is to be addressed.

FIGURE 4  
PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO SOUGHT  
NEGATIVE FEEDBACK AS A FUNCTION OF  
EXPERTISE LEVEL (STUDY 4)



*Finkelstein & Fishbach , 2012*

### Verifying & Non-Verifying Feedback

Whether someone is in the workforce or attending school, part of the learning process is receiving feedback in the form of formal reviews or written grades. These forms of feedback are extremely important to the recipient as they can define how much money they make, ensure job security, and open the door for future opportunities and growth. Unfortunately, as discussed in the previous journal *Now that's the feedback I want!' students' reactions to feedback on graded work and what they do with it*, most people only focus on the grade or score they receive and do not use the process as a developmental tool. Due to this, the predetermined grade expectations of the students affect their ability to process the feedback. (Pitt & Norton , 2017) In a related study by Jones, Georgiades, & Gunson, a new process is being used to give feedback to students. Instead of just receiving a final grade, they can view the professor grade their submissions during the mark up process. This is valuable research as it introduces not only just delivering feedback to individuals, but further, giving them the small details of the feedback while their work is reviewed. The effect this has on the receiving of feedback has many interesting implications.



*Pitt & Norton, 2017*

“The video feedback evoked a positive emotional response to the constructive comments provided. Even in the case of a fail mark, the response was positive since the improvements required were clearly visible or audible... To summarize the pilot experience for students and their tutor, the use of the video screen capture as a

communication channel for the assessment of overseas 'M' level students is a very positive one. Screen capture as a channel has the added advantage of the student being more attentive and engaged with the feedback. Before, they would look quickly at the comments and pay great attention to the mark. Now, they listen and are taken through their own text and the comments in a fun way.” (Jones, Georghiades , & Gunson , 2012)

**Table 1** Perception of feedback content

Respondents were asked to indicate how,	Strongly/slightly agree (%)	Strongly/ slightly disagree
Q1. I know what I have to do in order to improve with the information given in the feedback	100	–
Q2. I could do with some more feedback on the work	33	67
Q3. I know what I have done poorly in addition to what I did well with the details given in my feedback	98	2
Q4. I found the feedback helpful and clear	100	–
Q5. I think that feedback I received reflects my mark	98	2
Q6. I feel that I deserved the mark I had for this work	90	10
Q7. It is clear from the video feedback where I have lost marks	96	4

*Jones, Georghiades, & Gunson , 2012*

These findings reinforce the notion that feedback should be a 2-way dialogue with a larger role in the learner’s part of the feedback process. This article further supports this theory and incorporates it with modern technology and at a larger scale where one on one sit downs are not always feasible. In modern society it is increasingly important to incorporate the use of technology when not only delivering feedback, but during the analysis process.

### **Feedback Giver**

### **Specific & Non-Specific**

There are many variables of the feedback recipient that can affect how feedback is received and subsequently applied efficiently. Although, the full burden of producing effective feedback does not fall on just the receiver, it also falls upon the effectiveness of the superior in the relationship. In a study by Liden & Mitchell, reactions to feedback were studied in an experimental simulation. The results showed that the students rated specific feedback more positively than they rated vague. As stated, "Within this study's limits, the results clearly show that individuals rate specific feedback, operationalized as information pertaining to the feedback recipient's past performance and the performance of peers, more positively than they rate nonspecific feedback." (Liden & Mitchell, 1985) Overall, these findings are important as they reinforce the original hypothesis the authors had that people who are receiving feedback from a person in a position of power prefer it to be specific. It also shows specific feedback task to be rated more positively than nonspecific feedback pertaining to the overall task itself.

### **Assessor & Supervisor Ratings**

One of the more overlooked part of the feedback process is the competency of the assessor. In a study by Bell & Arthur, Feedback acceptance by over 140 participants were studied in an operational developmental assessment center. The results showed that higher feedback acceptance was associated with higher assessor ratings. They found that individuals were more likely to accept self-inconsistent personality feedback from a high-status therapist compared to a low status therapist. This parallels another study by Stets & Asencio. where a work simulation was done where feedback was given to workers. This feedback may or not have differed from the

workers own thoughts on their own performance. Their emotional reactions were observed as well as an investigation of the power and status of the managers.

“The emotions that individuals' feel in a situation are not only a function of the relationship between their identity standard and identity feedback, but also their relationship to others in the situation, along with their corresponding social structural positions. The more the worker positively evaluated the manager, the more the worker reported feeling good for non-verifying feedback that was overly positive or overly negative” (Stets & Asencio , 2008).

This relates to prior research that someone’s response and acceptance to non-verifying feedback is strongly related to their own positive thoughts of their manager’s effectiveness. This furthers the idea that a person’s emotional reactions to persistent non-verifying identity play a major role in feedback response and application.

### **Research Findings & Implications**

#### **Incremental Feedback**

Now that the factors that can affect how feedback is effectively received are defined, the techniques and programs we can incorporate to help the overall efficiency of the feedback process can be looked at. The research done by Jones, Georghiades, & Gunson, on student feedback via screen capture digital video, has shown that students tend to focus predominately on their final grades. Arguably more important, the study also showed that when students were able to observe the grading process, they payed closer attention to their areas of opportunity and



were able to process the feedback more efficiently in a positive manner. This goes hand in hand with the differences people have when they are receiving verifying feedback vs. non-verifying feedback. As described in the findings by Stets & Asencio, workers showed a more negative emotion response to non-verifying feedback than to verifying feedback. This is important as the conclusion can then be made that if the gap can be closed on the assessor's rating of the individual and their own self review, then an increase of the effectiveness of the feedback will occur. If employees, teachers, or coaches focus on working with their people, and giving them feedback in smaller increments "in the moment", it will not only increase the likeliness that the feedback will be better received, but in result, increase the development of the feedback recipients.

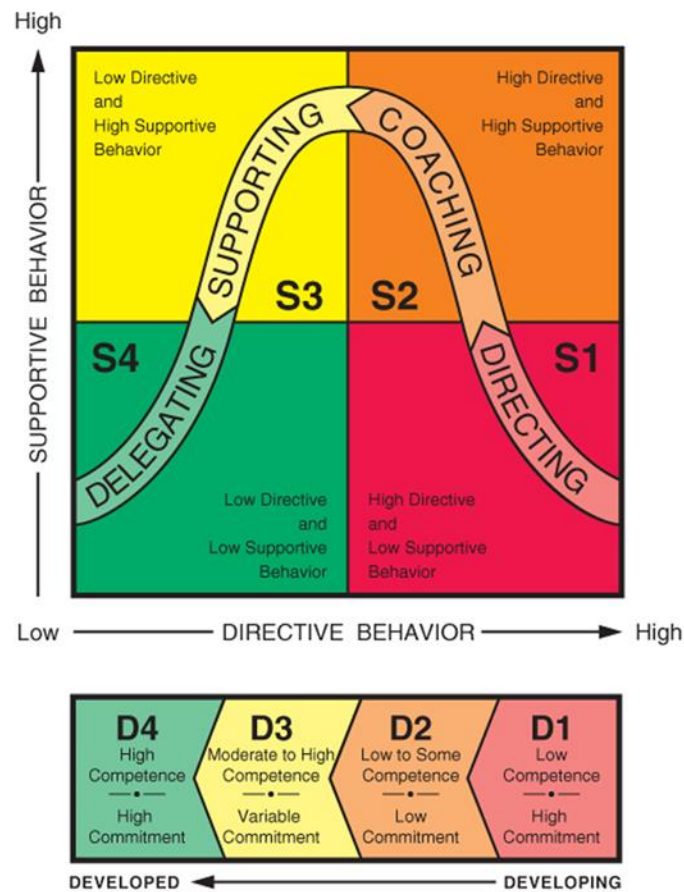
### **Development Level Adaption**

Focusing on changing your leadership style to fit the needs of your subordinates is crucial to the feedback process. A program developed by Ken Blanchard called "Situational Leadership II" does this by adapting your feedback dependent on the development level an individual is at for a certain goal or task.

"Situational Leadership® II is a process for developing people by providing effective leadership, over time, so that they can reach their highest level of performance. It is based upon a relationship between an individual's development level (various combinations of competence and commitment) on a specific goal or task and the leadership style (various combinations of Directive and Supportive Behavior) that the leader provides." (Blanchard, 2001)

This program is related to the research because it incorporates the ideas that giving the correct kind of feedback is situational. If a leader can make the situation to the type of feedback given, then you will see a more expedited rate of developmental growth within subordinates. At the same time, if you give the improper kind of feedback, it can either insult, overwhelm, or frustrate someone into being demotivated. The program also touches upon the idea of feedback vs. motivation. It is important to balance these two ideas as they can end up being conflicting. While you may want to give motivational support to someone, you are not helping them by skipping over the critical feedback that they may need. Likewise, if you give them feedback constantly without reinforcing positive values and self-thought, it can be a severe detriment to their motivation.

### Situational Leadership® II Model



Blanchard, 2001

### Feedback Literacy

Another finding that arose during the research process was the importance of feedback literacy. As found in the study by Pitt & Norton, they emphasized the negative effect that “emotional backwash” can have on students receiving feedback. Their feelings were that the best way to counter this was by encouraging them to be more feedback literate. In the book, *Thanks*

*for the feedback: The science and art of receiving feedback well*, the authors argue that educating receivers of feedback yields greater results compared to developing the feedback givers themselves. “It doesn’t matter how much authority or power a feedback giver has; the receivers are in control of what they do and don’t let in, how they make sense of what they’re hearing, and whether they choose to change.” (Stone & Heen, 2015). This is a key part of self-development. People wait to be told what to do or how to do it, but then make an unconscious decision to disregard that feedback. When you take your own development into your own hands you can receive information in a positive manner and apply it without emotional attachment.

<b>Identity Questions</b>	<b>Fixed</b>	<b>Growth</b>
Who am I?	I’m fixed. I am who I am.	I change, learn, grow.
Can I change?	My traits are fixed—effort doesn’t really change the fundamental truth about people.	My capabilities are always evolving. Effort and hard work pay off.
What’s the goal?	Success. The outcome is what matters.	The process of learning is what’s rewarding. Success is a by-product.
When do I feel smart/capable/successful?	When I do something perfectly, and when I do it better than others.	When I struggle with something and then start to figure it out (others’ abilities are less relevant to my own potential).
Response to challenge	Threat! I may be exposed as not up to the challenge.	Opportunity! I can learn something and improve.
Most comfortable environment?	Safely within my abilities and comfort zone.	Just outside my abilities to stretch my capabilities.

It simply becomes a decision on whether this information applies and if it will help oneself's development or not. This way of thinking creates a journey of self-development which is not only task or situationally specific, but something that you can continue to develop throughout your lifetime and grow toward your own success.

### **Research Directions**

Future research into feedback is needed to continue to develop the findings that have been discussed. It would be interesting to see a study done on how feedback given from a lowly rated supervisor could help develop a subordinate. It is possible that people not only learn what to do from a highly performing superior, but they might also learn what not to do from a poorly performing superior. There is also much more work to be done within studying the effects of learners being feedback literate. This is one of the findings that arose from this research but ended up showing that regardless of the other factors involved, everyone can greatly benefit from being educated on the important of self-development and being able to correctly receive feedback. It would also be beneficial to see more research done on how to manage emotionally unstable subordinates. The question would be, depending on the situation, what different techniques can be used to increase feedback acceptance in these special cases, or, does the individual need to work on their own self development and stability before they can succeed and develop in the workplace. Does this emotional instability act as a bottleneck for performance where they can only reach a maximum potential without some extended psychological or medicinal help? It is likely that this may be out of the supervisor's control and left up to professionals in other fields.

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