The Landscape of Feedback
Henry Most
Leadership Coach/Interpersonal & Diversity Dynamics Facilitator
Stanford Graduate School of Business

Intent vs. Impact – One frame for why is feedback is important
You've perhaps heard the adage: "the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Often, despite our best intentions, our behaviors don't have the desired impact. Sometimes, we can understand our impact just by observing others' body language, but more often than not, we don't know how we've landed on others, and some verbal feedback is helpful.

- Feedback allows us to actually understand whether or not our intentions are having their desired impact

- And if not, we may choose to recalibrate, better aligning our behavior with our intended impact, and in the process, likely learn something about ourselves

- This then can become an iterative process, wherein we get feedback on the altered behavior, adjust, etc.

- Sometimes if we haven't already shared our intention, a moment of receiving feedback may offer the chance to do so, which may garner some empathy from others around a unfavorably received behavior

Giving Feedback:
Strive to hold a backdrop of curiosity and compassion about where the behavior comes from in the person. And remember: feedback is ALWAYS information about the giver, and may or may not have a lot for the receiver

- Perhaps "start with where you are" (SWWYA) – concerns about giving the feedback, name the risk level

- And maybe your intention in sharing it (e.g., to build connection, to become more known, to take a risk)

- Note timing of giving feedback
    - Are you the 5th person to give the same person feedback? If so, can it wait? (An opportunity to self-sooth.) [A caveat to this: if you are more introverted and struggle to get your voice in, it may be helpful for you (and the group) to come in later, and name your intention in doing so.]

- o Perhaps get permission from the person to give it, whether you're fifth or first
- o One caveat to this: if you are relatively introverted or struggle to get your voice in, it may be worth coming in late and repeating feedback; and if you choose to, you might share your intention in doing so (i.e., practicing getting your voice in)

- Keep your antenna tuned for and/or openness around possible cultural/social identity issues at play:
  - o In the behavior you're noting
  - o In the relative identity of you and the receiver (dominant/non-dominant groups); i.e., how might the variation impact the actual delivery/receipt of the feedback? Or drive the actual content of the feedback itself
  - o Take the risk to name some of this

- Helpful to remember that often we have distancing reactions or pinches to behaviors in others that we don't like seeing in ourselves. Is this at play? Might you name it?

Receiving feedback:
As when you give feedback, hold a backdrop of curiosity and compassion for yourself and the other (they're likely taking a risk in giving it, especially if it's unfavorable)

- SWWYA: How do you feel before receiving it; is it even the right time for you to receive it; have you already received enough?

- Then, after receiving, how do you feel:
  - o Defensiveness is common and helpful to name rather than try to suppress (inclination to explain, qualify, or clarify often points to defensiveness)
  - o Fear, sadness, relief, inspired etc.

- If not too emotionally charged or after you're down regulated, **reflect back what you've heard** (behavior, reaction/feeling/impact)

Keeping in mind that feedback is always information about the giver, feedback is also NOT a mandate for change; it's information/data for you. It's your choice what you do with it, but not your choice of the impact it has had, is having, or continues to have

- **If one person in a group or over time in your life gives you feedback on a topic**, you may just be learning something about that individual and that can inform how you choose to interact/connect with that person moving forward (e.g., you might inquire during or after subsequent interactions if they had a response similar to the one earlier, or take care to name your intention when starting future interactions with them, both of which show care/compassion/joining and may very well diminish the trigger for the other)

- **However, if multiple people give you the same feedback**, you may want to reflect on where the observed behavior comes from in you, what are the feelings/thoughts that precede the behavior? Sometimes gaining this awareness and allowing yourself to experience those underlying feelings can actually shift how you show up in similar situations (softening, diminishing, or even dissolving the behavior in question)*

- More broadly, regardless of the above, strive for openness to any kernels of useful self-reflection the feedback might offer you

- As with giving, does the identity/cultural background of the giver relative to yours impact how you feel in the exchange? Might it be reflected in the feedback itself? Might you open this as a possibility?

For giver and receiver:

- What is the impact of having this exchange on the relationship? More trust, less trust? Different and more favorable than you expected perhaps (especially when sharing unfavorable reactions)?

- **We tend to conceive of this all around *unfavorable* feedback; however, the same context, tips, best practices apply to feedback of all valences.** And in fact, many people struggle with giving and/or receiving favorable feedback, sometimes more so than they do with unfavorable. (Often there are cultural and family of origin factors at play in this.)

The Bi-Directional Loop
Most physical feedback systems are actually feedback *loops*, and sometimes they're bi-directional. Yet when we think about interpersonal feedback, we often think about it as a distinct moment and uni-directional, most likely because our experiences of formal feedback situations do in fact proceed that way, as from supervisor to employee or teacher to student. And even our informal experiences of feedback often proceed similarly. (Further, for many of us, when we have actually experienced bi-drectional exchanges, it has really been more of an exchange of projections and stories about each other, rather than actual information from each giver about the other's impact.)

It is important to understand that interpersonal feedback is ideally a *bi-directional feedback loop*. A courageous sharing of impacts, that may allow each participant to feel more heard, known, and understood than they were prior, and therein lead to a deepening of trust and connection. This loop is concurrent with and feeds into the iterative internal one of behavior, feedback, calibration, feedback, etc.

Feedback Model (to use amidst all of the above)

- What you observed
  (as if captured on video)

- What it evoked in you
  [feelings words, somatic response, movement (towards, away, against, frozen), metaphor/thought bubbles (that you own)]

- Third optional step: impact on the relationship (e.g., trust level) or where it comes from in you (there and now); consider who/what does this remind you of

For all of the above and the feedback model, it is helpful to first PAUSE and notice what's going on for you in body, heart, and mind.

*One way to think about this is that the behavior represents a fixed (objectified) internal relationship to an underlying, unmanageable experience (physiologic and emotional phenomena), which in turn can get projected onto an other, who then also is effectively fixed or objectified. Gaining awareness of and experiencing these inner phenomena may shortly or over time dimension-alize what seems fixed and unmanageable (letting it become a *subject*), effectively transforming the fixed relationship with one's self, and allowing a different or freer outward display. This, in turn, transforms the relationship with the other (allowing the other to be experienced as a subject, as well). Similarly, the fixed *thoughts* that developed around what was unmanageable may be shifted or cleared through this process, allowing room for new possibilities, a more creative orientation for the most human part of the brain.