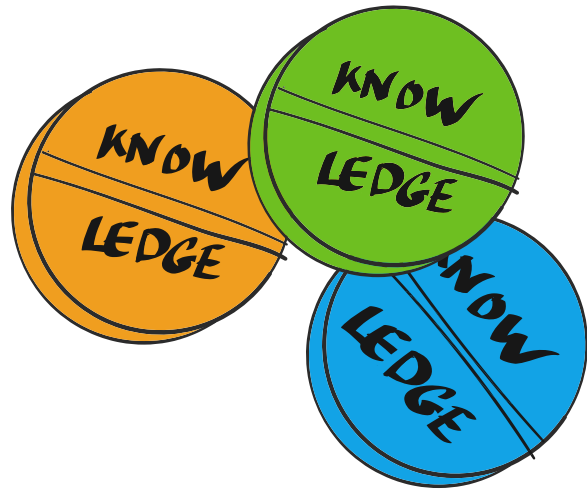


FEEDBACK FIRST



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THE DYNAMICS OF FEEDBACK

- INTRODUCTION
- **1. THE DYNAMICS OF FEEDBACK**
- 2. INTRODUCTION TO CLEAR+CALM FEEDBACK
- 3. CLEAR STEPS FOR GIVING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK
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- 9. CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORK ENVIRONMENT
- 10. FORMAL FEEDBACK

BOOSTING ORGANISATIONAL PERFORMANCE
THROUGH CLEAR+CALM® COMMUNICATION

HUIBERT EVEKINK WITH STEVEN BECKER

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CLEAR+CALM by futureteaming^o

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THE DYNAMICS OF FEEDBACK

'Understanding evolves through three phases: simplistic, complex and profoundly simple.'

William Schult

'So, when you compliment Saanvi for organising a great event, she gets a little shot of a brain chemical called dopamine. This dopamine produces a feeling of joy and motivates her to keep doing a great job. You see, it makes perfect business sense to recognise our team members!' My class of Asian managers nodded and made some notes.

Five years ago I developed a 'people skills'

course to help leaders run their teams more effectively. We invited managers from all functions, regions and levels, with many of them coming from an engineering background, where emotional intelligence was not part of the menu.

During the first sessions the participants remained silent and visibly bored. In the course feedback—unsurprisingly—I got low marks as the leaders rated the experience as a waste of valuable time: too soft, too vague, too wishy-washy. So I decided to make the 'soft' into 'hard' by going back to the basics: what drives behaviour? If I could prove that there is science behind the way humans think, feel and act maybe my logically-minded colleagues would enjoy the course more. The next session I started out talking about evolution, fight or flight, human biases, universal drives, cultural norms, neuroscience and much, much more. It worked! Spontaneous discussions erupted, as people started making the links with their daily work and even their private lives. Human behaviour suddenly became understandable and interesting. Some participants even started reflecting on their own attitude.

Once we reached a good level of theoretical

understanding, I finished with steps, tips and tricks, which now made more sense. People could easily remember them and—more importantly—use them in a flexible way to improve team engagement and performance.

My takeaways from five years from giving courses to hundreds of managers around the world:

1. Most of us have a rather simplistic and judgemental view of other people. He is bad, she is smart, they are lazy, the Dutch are cheap, women are emotional, men cannot multi-task, marketers are liars and software developers are nerds. Ignorance is bliss because it allows us to quickly make sense of the world, without having to worry about inconvenient facts.
2. To understand and manage human behaviour you need to question your assumptions, starting with the word 'why'. Once you have a solid understanding of human behaviour, then steps, hacks and checklists can help you to remember and apply deeper knowledge: tips make life a bit simpler.

3. Tips without deeper understanding are too simplistic to be useful. Based on the number of 'life hacks' we consume on a daily basis, you would expect us all to be much better leaders, parents, partners and professionals; however, such shortcuts don't work.

A pilot can teach you how to fly using a simulator in a couple of hours; trust me, I managed to take-off, cruise and land in stable conditions. Then my instructor simulated an engine fire and I was immediately in trouble because I did not have the knowledge, training or experience to adapt to the emergency situation. Managing yourself and other people's behaviour is a bit like flying and—unfortunately—many of us struggle to keep the plane in the air.

We, the authors, believe that every part of our character, background, social context and traditions has a crucial impact on how we give and receive feedback. So before we introduce our CLEAR+CALM method, this chapter will give you the necessary insights to understand and manage the dynamics of feedback.

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It's All About Behaviour

In his book *Cultures and Organizations*, Geert Hofstede, the 'godfather' of cultural studies, describes three different 'software programs' that drive human thinking and behaviour: personality, culture and human nature.⁷ The problem with some of this mental software is that it may have worked well in the past but it has never been updated to deal with the present or future.

- **Human nature** is what all of us have in common, from Iceland to Bora Bora. It's hardwired into our brains, forming a universal 'operating system'. We all feel fear, shame, anger, joy and sadness. We are all attracted and submissive to power. We all want to belong to a tribe. We are all highly sensitive to fairness: 'I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine'. We all want to be loved and our sense of empathy drives us to care about the people around us. However, what we do with these drives and feelings—how we express emotions like fear, joy and anger—is influenced by culture and personality.

- **Culture** is made up of unwritten laws and values that we learn in our social environment: 'the way we do things around here'. We tend to judge 'the way they do things around there' by our own cultural norms and usually not for the better. The conflict between groups over religious beliefs, political values and behavioural norms is sadly a part of our daily lives.
- **Personality** is unique to every individual. It is shaped by distinctive character traits that are partly inherited (nature) and partly modified by culture and experience (nurture).

By themselves, human drives, culture and personality are complex topics and often quite difficult to understand. Mix them together and you can end up with a big knot that would take years—if ever—of study and experience to untangle.

However, a basic knowledge of mental software is a good starting point to understanding and managing the dynamics of feedback.

⁷ (Geert Hofstede, 2010, pp. 5-7)

Human Nature and Feedback



Human nature refers to the drives and instincts which we tend to have naturally, independent of our personality and cultural influences. It includes ways of thinking, feeling and acting.

In their books **Driven** and **Driven to Lead**, Harvard Professors Paul Lawrence and Nitin Nohria take years of research from the different social sciences and neuroscience to provide a powerful explanation for the origins of human behaviour.⁸ They propose four innate, independent human drives that shape our social behaviour and the choices we make:

1. A drive to acquire and control goods and experiences that improve our status in relation to others.

2. A drive to bond with others in caring relationships.
3. A drive to learn and make sense of the world.
4. A drive to defend ourselves, our loved ones, beliefs and material possessions.

The underlying logic is that all four drives improve our odds of passing our genes on to the next generation.

Now let's apply these drives to feedback in an organisational setting:

Drive 1. A Drive to Acquire and Control: Keeping the Boss Happy



⁸ (Paul Lawrence, 2002, pp. 55-148)

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Organisations offer the perfect environment for this drive to flourish as we compete and compare for resources—money—and status. It’s in our genes to fight for power and to submit to authority, starting with the respect we (must) show for our parents. Lack of power generates fear of losing one’s job, of not getting that promotion, of humiliation and this angst is often used to reinforce systems of hierarchy.

On the other hand, having the power can lead you to overestimate your impact and superiority. Leaders, as they gain power, often feel an increasing distance and difference between themselves and their followers. This process of ‘dehumanization’ deprives followers of human qualities and reduces both the ability to empathise and the willingness to tune into the opinion of colleagues lower in rank. Leaders can become cruel, corrupt and detached from reality. Open any history book and you see this same story unfolding time and time again. Distance in combination with authority can lead to disaster: dictatorial leadership with brutal oppression.

Power Tends to Corrupt

In a fascinating experiment, the HEC business school of Lausanne set up lab experiments where participants played a dictator game. Leaders had to decide how to divide the money between themselves and their teams.

Results showed that leaders with more followers, or higher power leaders, took more of the money, and high levels of testosterone made the corruption worse.⁹ Testosterone, a hormone found in men and women, prepares us for danger and competition, increasing fearlessness and risk taking, while lowering empathy and social behaviour. Men produce ten to twenty times as much of it as women. Not surprisingly, a study by the World Bank concludes that a higher rate of female participation in government is associated with lower levels of corruption.¹⁰ We can safely assume the same for companies and other organisations.

⁹ (Samuel Bendahana, 2015)

¹⁰ (David Dollar, 1999)

By its very nature, hierarchy dramatically reduces the desire of those lower down to speak up and those higher up to listen. In many organisations, it is a basic survival strategy to inflate the degree to which you agree with your superiors. Managers reinforce this behaviour by, unconsciously, looking for an endorsement of their views, rather than honest questioning or critical feedback. The danger with flattery is that it cuts them off from the facts.

Under these circumstances, it is not hard to understand that feedback can become a risky business. Despite the proven benefits of speaking up, employees often remain silent out of a combination of fear, respect and even childlike admiration for the person in power. The world of work is littered with organisations—NASA’s Discovery Space Shuttle explosion, South Yorkshire Police’s Hillsborough football disaster, Enron’s accounting scandals, Lehman Brothers’ investment strategy, the BP oil spill and Volkswagen TDI—that

drove themselves and their surroundings, into the ground, because team members and peers did not feel safe to challenge their misguided or corrupt leaders.

While there has been a growing trend toward more participative work relationships and practices, feedback is still something that usually happens from the top down: from the powerful to the powerless.

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Power Play at The Royal Bank of Scotland

It was the biggest financial time bomb in history, and it took £45 billion of taxpayer's money to bail out the Royal Bank of Scotland.

The incredible growth of RBS took place over a 10-year period and was led by CEO Fred, 'the Shred', Goodwin and his Board. As the credit crunch was tightening its grip on the financial markets in 2007, Goodwin led a \$100 billion takeover of Dutch rival ABN Amro, stretching RBS's capital reserves to the limit and ultimately bringing RBS down.

In his Financial Times article 'A Culture Ratio is More Important than a Capital Ratio' Simon Samuels compares how three pairs of Banks, similar in capital strengths, survived the financial crisis: Citigroup and JPMorgan Chase; RBS and Barclays; Fortis and BNP Paribas.¹¹ Citi, RBS and Fortis needed the taxpayers to step in; the others did not. Samuels concludes that the determining factor was not the capital levels, but the feedback culture. In RBS the directors of the board

were experienced and qualified bankers, but they did they not stand up to authority. Apparently, the culture was not one that encouraged challenge and feedback. The board felt intimidated by Goodwin and did not challenge him or each other.

The UK's 2009 Walker Report on Corporate Governance explicitly recommends that directors should be ready, able and encouraged to challenge and test proposals on strategy put forward by the CEO. They should satisfy themselves that board discussion and decision-making on risk matters is based on accurate and appropriately comprehensive information and draws on external analysis and input.¹² On 21 July 2016, 13 of America's heavyweight CEOs (e.g. GM, GE, JPMorgan, Berkshire Hathaway), worried about big business popularity being at an all-time low, released a report called Commonsense Corporate Governance Principles, containing 77 suggestions for how big companies should be led, how they should communicate with their shareholders, and how large investment firms should fulfil their own responsibilities.¹³ Several recommendations mention feedback:

¹¹ (Samuels, 2014)

¹² (Walker, 2009)

¹³ (The Economist, 2016)

'Directors should be strong and steadfast, independent of mind and willing to challenge constructively but not be divisive or self-serving. Collaboration and collegiality also are critical for a healthy, functioning board.'¹⁴

Drive 2. A Drive to Bond: Nurturing Relationships



The drive to bond is the reason we build and nurture strong relationships with individuals and groups around us. If the first drive is all about 'me', the second drive promotes the 'we'. Our drive to build and maintain caring relationships with others may stop us from asking for feedback or giving advice. Since we don't want to be

perceived as ignorant, cruel or superior we withhold—or water down—our feedback.

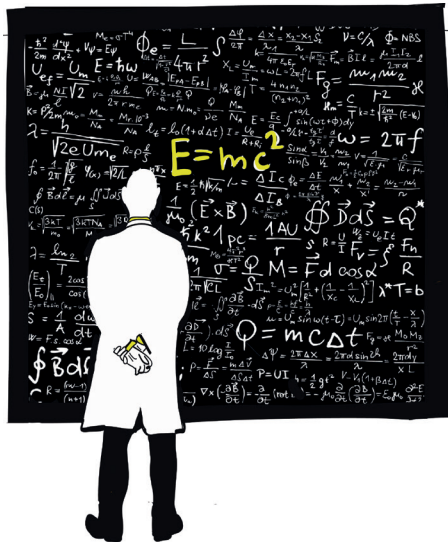
For the receiver, threatening feedback can provoke deep feelings of fear, rejection and ridicule: our status in the group is under attack. We may look for feedback to learn, but often interpret the response as evidence that we are unloved or disrespected. From an evolutionary standpoint, being an outcast is fatal. To protect ourselves from this feedback-related anxiety, we have a tendency to absorb feedback that makes us feel good and filter out what we don't like. We are often not aware of this selection process.

In close-knit teams, we may feel additional pressure to avoid raising 'controversial' issues or alternative solutions to maintain harmony. This psychological phenomenon is called group-think and it produces an increased certainty that the right decision has been made, without considering new facts or alternative solutions.

¹⁴(CorpGov-SVC, 2016)

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Drive 3. A Drive to Learn: Convincing Ourselves that We Are Always Right



The drive to explore and find meaning should naturally promote feedback, but more often it produces defensive reactions—that is if new information clashes with what we already think or believe about others, the world and ourselves. Here, we enter into the field of universal biases and stereotypes—predetermined mental notions and beliefs—that lead us to follow a quasi-logical route to form opinions about others, usually not for the better.

A **bias** is a term used to describe a preference towards a particular perspective, ideology or result, especially when prejudice makes it hard to be impartial or objective.

A **stereotype** is a preconceived idea that attributes certain characteristics to all the members of a group. The term often has a negative meaning when referring to an oversimplified, exaggerated, or demeaning assumption.

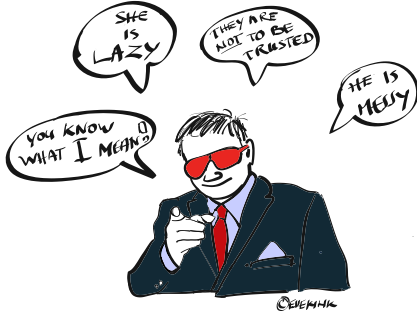
If you think that all Asians are smart, or white men can't dance, that is a stereotype. But if you hired a man for a job when you interviewed an equally qualified woman because you think women are not as decisive as men, you are biased.

Most biases (of which there are plenty) can be traced back to the confirmation bias or the tendency to seek and find confirmatory evidence to 'prove' pre-existing beliefs and to ignore or rationalise away disconfirming evidence. I can think of several colleagues who, once they make up their mind about someone, will always find evidence to support their—first—impression, no matter what happens. With them you are forever blessed or doomed. We fail to see that the truth is just one version of reality: our story, featuring ourselves in a heroic role. We find it hard—or

even impossible—to understand and accept that others are living their own adventure.

Let's have a look at some of the most important biases:

'You Are the Problem' Bias (aka Fundamental Attribution Bias)



We typically attribute others' problematic behaviour to their poor attitude or personality, rather than look at their circumstances. As such, it is not entirely strange that feedback can come across as a personal attack or character assassination. We do exactly the opposite when we blame our own failures on the circumstances of the situation.

'My Universal Truth Bias' (aka Naive Realism Bias)



We tend to see our world as the only objective truth. This reality is so 'naturally obvious' that we cannot imagine any other points of view, unless we are dealing with irrational people. When we give feedback, therefore, we often fail to explain our arguments with clear examples.

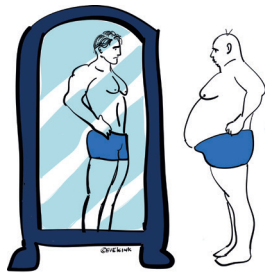
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Paranoia Bias (aka Negativity Bias)



Research shows that we pay more attention to negative feedback than we do to positive feedback.¹⁵ We remember negative comments more than praise and we can dwell compulsively on critical remarks even if they're buried beneath heaps of compliments.

'I Am Above Average' Bias (aka Self-Serving Biases)



Self-serving biases lead us to be over-optimistic about our own behaviour and achievements. In other words, we see ourselves through rose-coloured glasses. These positive self-perceptions keep us motivated and productive, but they also prevent us from recognizing that we are sometimes wrong. Therefore, it is no wonder that so many people brush others' critical feedback off as inaccurate and only look for evidence to confirm their desired state. Lying to yourself destroys the possibility of learning.

We are good at spotting these self-serving biases in others, but it is hard to accept that we have them too: 'Other people might be biased, but I am obviously above average!'

By understanding some of these universal bias dynamics, both the receiver and the giver can take a more informed and constructive approach to feedback.

¹⁵ (Sutton, Hornsey, & Douglas, 2012, p. 129)

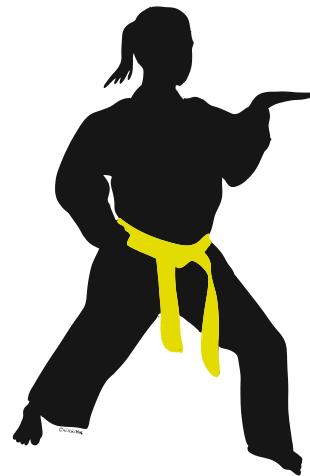
‘Don’t confuse me with the facts’

In their book **Partisan Hearts and Minds**, political scientists Donald Green, Bradly Palmquist, and Eric Schickler demonstrated that most people do not vote for a political party for its position on specific political issues—like healthcare or climate change. Instead, we support a political ideology, usually inherited from our parents or friends during our upbringing. Once we identify with the left, the right—or anything in between—the confirmation bias helps us find evidence to confirm our deeper political beliefs and—unconsciously—rationalise away claims that may clash. Politicians know how to sell big ideas and get votes, regardless of the facts. The claims that helped the United Kingdom to Brexit were either wrong or impossible to predict. Spend some time on www.factcheck.org, a website that aims to reduce the level of deception in U.S. politics, and you will see that what politicians say and claim is increasingly ‘factless’.

Another example of hanging on to deep beliefs is the right to bear firearms as protected in the Second Amendment to the

United State Constitution of 1789. Mass shootings are used by the anti-gun supporters as an argument for restricting the sales of firearms, while the pro-gun lobby reframes the same sad events in order to push gun ownership for self-defence. Sure enough, their strategy seems to work: gun purchases and gun stock prices go up after mass shootings.

Drive 4. A Drive to Defend: Fight or Flight



As human beings, we have an innate drive to defend our valued achievements, belongings, status, relationships and beliefs. Remember that the words used in feedback

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can feel just as threatening as physical danger: mental pain hurts too. Threat triggers defensiveness and as a result, we either attack or retreat. As we can see around us every day, much of human activity is provoked by this drive.

In his book **The Chimp Paradox**, Dr Steve Peters gives an easy way to understand how the mind works.¹⁸ His 'Chimp Management' model is made up of the Chimp (frontal brain), The Human (limbic brain) and the Monkey (parietal brain) to form the psychological mind. These brains are supposed to work together but often fight for control, especially in times of perceived danger and stress.

Apply this model to receiving negative feedback and most of us have experienced the 'inner discussions' of the human and the chimp.

The Human INTERESTING.



¹⁸ (Peters, 2013)

When we have time and feel relaxed we explore for facts. We look for evidence to support our arguments and offer fair feedback. Like scientists, we investigate the context of the situation and the people involved.

Human Thinking

- Realising that opinions are not facts: we can truly only see our own reality.
- Building arguments using evidence.
- Avoiding rationalising away uncomfortable facts and events to protect our image and self-esteem.
- Showing empathy for people around us.
- Focusing on compromise and mutually beneficial solutions to problems.
- Understanding that humans make mistakes and nobody is perfect.

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The Monkey



The monkey symbolises our emotional machine. In milliseconds the brain can process thoughts and feelings that are triggered by danger or opportunity. Some emotions are automatic and unconscious, like fear of snakes; some translate into conscious feelings—anger, shame, love and happiness. Emotions keep us safe and give our lives meaning and value.

Monkey Thinking

- Jumping to conclusions.
- Acting impulsively before thinking things through.
- Being paranoid and suspicious of

others ('They are out to get me', 'Trust nobody').

- Focusing excessively on negative feedback and ignoring the positive ('Better safe than sorry').
- Having catastrophic thoughts ('It will all go wrong').
- Black-and-white thinking ('He is evil' or 'You are for or against me').

This 'shoot-first-ask-questions-later' attitude keeps us safe in dangerous situations, but it is often inappropriate in normal organisational life.

Monkey Attack



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My friend Anna uses the monkey to describe how she sometimes feels after receiving critical feedback: 'My monkey was jumping all over the place after David told me the numbers in the budget were wrong' or 'I was dealing with a paranoid monkey when Marit didn't reply to my mail'. Anna cleverly uses the mental picture of a monkey to name the emotion (anger, fear, jealousy) to control her reactions. She also knows that the thoughts and reactions of the monkey do not define her as a person, but that she is responsible for calmly dealing with her impulses before they deal with her.

Fight or Flight



If your monkey feels your sense of safety or status is under massive attack, it will become angry and fearful, making you aggressive or submissive to the dominant person. Once your 'fight or flight' instincts

have hijacked your brain, it is difficult to think straight and learn.

In response to milder threats, we use coping mechanisms that help us deal with unpleasant—and often conflicting—thoughts, feelings and behaviours.¹⁹ In psychology, this type of mental stress is called 'cognitive dissonance'. If I see myself as a highly distinguished expert, a mistake can make me feel incompetent and foolish. To reduce the mental stress, the brain will reframe the situation in my favour and rationalise away the inconvenient evidence.

Some of the ways in which we unconsciously defend ourselves against negative feedback are:

1. Refusing to accept reality or facts. We act as if a painful event did not happen or deny that it is actually a failure.
2. Downplaying the importance or impact of the feedback. We can also pretend we simply do not care what others think of us.
3. Coming up with convenient excuses. We blame others to counter critical feedback.

¹⁹ (Millon, 2004, p. 67)

- 4. Questioning the credibility or intentions of the giver of feedback. From where we're standing, it looks like the giver lacks the skills or the right intentions to comment.



I have always been surprised at how creative people are when it comes to making up excuses for mistakes or poor performance, even if the evidence speaks for itself. After hours of pointless discussions, you could easily come to the conclusion that the receiver of feedback is either delusional or evil.

Today I understand that we are not always aware of the defences we put up to protect ourselves. Some mistakes are just too painful to accept, so our brains block

them out. The longer the discussion drags on, the more we dig in and the harder it becomes to admit we might be wrong. To make matters worse, specialists and leaders—smart, admired and powerful—have the most to lose from mistakes and therefore often filter out failure. Learning is sacrificed for ego, without even realising it.

Making the Same Mistakes...Over and Over Again

Johns Hopkins Hospital patient safety experts have calculated that more than 250,000 patients die every year due to medical error, making it the third biggest killer in the United States—behind heart disease and cancer. Matthew Syed, in his book **Black Box Thinking: The Surprising Truth About Success**, explains that health-care does not learn from failure. Making mistakes is considered unprofessional and therefore highly threatening to ego and reputation.²⁰ Mistakes are filtered out, and therefore made over and over again.

In the aviation industry the feedback culture enables crews to learn from errors,

²⁰(Syed, 2015)

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rather than being threatened by them. Team members are not intimidated about admitting mistakes because they know errors contain valuable information to improve safety and efficiency.

Many businesses, government organisations, security forces and hospitals, are starting to introduce feedback to learn from mistakes.

it has on us. It is like wearing red, white and blue coloured sunglasses and thinking other countries are just better or lesser versions of, in this case, Holland. National culture subconsciously affects the way we think, feel and act at home and in the office.

Despite living most of my life outside the Netherlands, the Netherlands very much lives inside me: I still see the world through filtered glasses, whether I like it or not.

However, after a lot of mistakes, reflection and immersion, I have become more culturally empathic. I can step back and imagine how people from certain other cultures might feel. That does not mean I always agree with local ways of thinking or doing things, but I can at least take them into account before passing judgement or withholding it altogether.

Culture can be a sensitive topic. We are all the same species, but every individual is different. Some people feel that focusing on cultural differences can lead us to stereotype and put individuals in boxes. Another hot topic is what I call, **'Who are you to talk about my mother?' syndrome**. I can be critical of the Dutch, but I can easily become defensive if I feel someone from a different

Culture and Feedback



Most of us are socialised to view the world from a national perspective. This deep and invisible programming starts early on in the family and continues in the neighbourhood, schools and the workplace. Because culture is so close to us—a part of us, if you will—we're somewhat blind to the effects

culture is judging my country. This syndrome is a normal group phenomenon called the 'intergroup sensitivity effect'.²¹

Cross-cultural Feedback

National cultures deeply impact the way we communicate and therefore, the way we give and receive feedback. Effective feedback in a single culture can often prove quite challenging; feedback across cultures is even more complex. Cross-cultural awareness and experiences can significantly improve our relationships and communication, but it is impossible to master every feedback style. We would need to speak hundreds of languages fluently AND know the cultural context. The cultural immersion required would be interesting, but highly impractical in an organisational setting.

Let's have a look at some of the differences in feedback orientation across cultures, using the Rolls Royce of culture studies: The Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) Study.²² Using the research data from 17,000 middle managers, a team of 170 researchers worked together to study the societal, culture and organisational

culture and attributes of effective leadership in 62 countries. Based on the work of Hofstede and others they developed eight more criteria to help profile countries in a consistent manner:

- Performance Orientation.
- Future Orientation.
- Gender Egalitarianism.
- Assertiveness.
- Individualism and Collectivism.
- Power Distance.
- Human Orientation.
- Uncertainty Avoidance.

From this academic study, we have chosen four dimensions that are particularly important when it comes to managing feedback: assertiveness, collectivism, gender egalitarianism and power distance. You can find a complete overview of the scores and tips on how to deal with different feedback styles, on **futureteaming.com/culture-feedback-tool**. This app was built together with our data analytics partner Conento.

²¹ (Sutton, Hornsey, & Douglas, 2012, p. 130)

²² (Robert J. House, 2004)

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Assertiveness



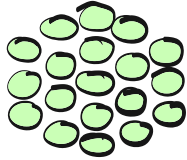
Assertiveness is the degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational and aggressive in their relationships with others.

- In highly assertive cultures like Germany, the United States and Turkey, social courtesies are rarely required before getting to the point. Summaries and repetition are appreciated in conversation, as they clarify the communication between both parties. Furthermore, negative feedback is to be provided frankly, bluntly and honestly. Negative messages stand alone and do not need to be softened by positive ones. Assertive cultures use absolute descriptors like 'totally unacceptable' or 'completely unprofessional' and criticism may be given in front of a group.
- In unassertive cultures like Sweden, Switzerland and New Zealand,

negative feedback is provided softly, subtly and diplomatically. Messages are ambiguous, implied but not plainly expressed. Qualifying descriptors are often used ('a bit', 'slightly', 'somewhat') during criticism. Feedback is almost always a private affair. Feedback can feel uncomfortable and can easily be seen as judgmental.

I will never forget my first big presentation to a group of German colleagues in Frankfurt. From the start the audience started asking questions in a very negative, confrontational and aggressive way. I managed to get through the ordeal thinking I had deeply disappointed everyone. When my German colleagues came up to greet me later I told them about my experience. They were surprised and explained they were simply testing my thinking. They told me I defended my arguments well and the presentation was credible and appreciated. I have been through the same process in France—unnerving until you understand what is going on.

Collectivism



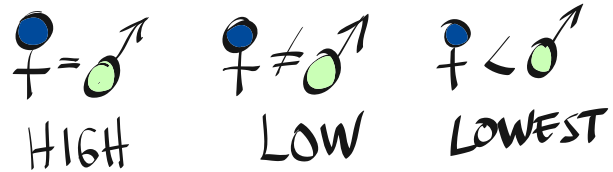
Individual and collective dimensions measure the degree to which people express pride, loyalty and cohesiveness with their organisations or families.

- In individualist cultures like Canada, England and Finland, there is a focus on individuals and personal goals and achievements. Uniqueness and self-determination are valued concepts. A person is admired if they are self-made; if they show initiative and work well independently. Feedback tends to be individualised and direct in the professional relationship.
- In collectivist cultures like India, Iran and Singapore, there is a collective, shared identity and a strong focus on harmony and group achievements. Feedback is more group-focused and less direct. If you fail, you fail the

group and losing face in front of the group is to be avoided at all costs.

After presenting in Frankfurt, I jumped on a plane to give the same presentation to my colleagues in Bangkok. Now I went from extreme confrontation to exactly the opposite. Few people in the audience would question what I presented or react to any of my invitations to speak up. However, group exercises were completed and presented with great enthusiasm. After the presentation, everyone smiled, thanked me and walked away, leaving me hungry for more feedback.

Gender Egalitarianism



One of the most fundamental ways societies differ is in the way they view the proper roles for—and relationships between—women and men. Some cultures believe that men and women are equal and suited to the same functions, both at work and at home. Less egalitarian societies believe that women have a different status than men and should take different roles.

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Societies that score low on gender egalitarianism promote relationships where men control women.

Scholars from various fields agree that the origins of the difference between men's and women's roles can be found in biology: women not only deliver children but also feed and nurture them.²³ So, we have developed a universal view that responsibility for taking care of people generally falls on women and men are in charge of providing—and often competing for—resources.

Stereotypes about what social roles are permitted for males and females influence participation in the labour market and contribution to family life. Gender inequality at home, in the workplace and society reinforce stereotypes, bringing us full circle: what you see is what you get and what you get is what you see.

Gender egalitarianism influences the way women give and receive feedback.

- In societies that score high on gender egalitarianism like Hungary, Denmark and Namibia, women are more likely to give feedback using their local feedback style as they actively participate in the labour

force in positions of authority and decision-making. That is not to say women do not suffer gender discrimination as access to top jobs and equal pay are hot topics in even the most egalitarian societies.

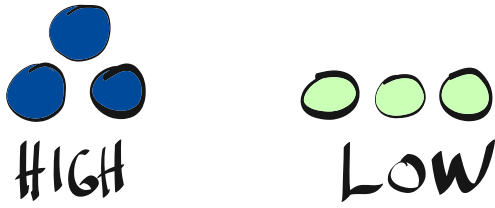
- In societies that score lower on gender egalitarianism, like Kuwait or South Korea, fewer women work. The ones that do work have less authority and status than men and tend to cluster in jobs deemed suitable for women, also known as 'pink-collar ghettos'. When you combine low status with hierarchy, it is clear that many of these societies lack the open and safe environment needed for women to speak up.

I once interviewed for a job with an Italian company. After several positive interviews, I asked the head of HR for some time to discuss the opportunity with my wife. His friendly attitude immediately disappeared and—with a look hovering between pity and disgust—he walked me out. Three days later I got a call from somebody on his team telling me they had decided to look for another candidate. They felt I was not a good cultural fit. After

²³ (Robert J. House, 2004, p. 348)

getting over the rejection, both my wife and I agreed it was for the best.

Power Distance



Power distance is the degree to which members of a group expect and accept power to be distributed equally.

- In low power distance societies like The Netherlands, Sweden and Australia, the ideal degree of separation between a boss and subordinates is relatively low. The supervisor is a facilitator among equals and organisational structures are flat, so that communication can skip hierarchical bounds. Feedback is a more interactive process (e.g. 360-degree assessments) that reaches a deeper level of information. Asking for feedback is accepted and even encouraged. Individuals will seek feedback from subordinates and superiors more than they will their peers.

- In high power distance cultures like Morocco, Russia and Spain, the ideal distance between bosses and subordinates is high. The boss is a strong director and the decision maker, leading from the front, without the need to consult with followers. Members are not expected to disagree. Organisational structures are multi-layered and fixed and communication travels down the hierarchy in that feedback is given from the top down. Individuals look for personal feedback from their peers more than they do their bosses or subordinates.

Having been a part of several multicultural teams, both as a leader and as a member, I have seen different attitudes to hierarchy provoking immense frustration in both high and low power distance colleagues. The more hierarchical teammates complain that others do not respect authority and they take on decisions that are not theirs to make. The low power distance team members complain that more hierarchical team members hold everything up—incapable of doing anything without feedback and approval

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from their supervisors. This situation slows projects down and demotivates the team.

predict behaviour even if people are far from home, especially when faced with uncertainty.

Cultural Origins Predict Death in Mountains

A study by Columbia and INSEAD Business School of 30,625 Himalayan mountain climbers from 56 countries on 5,104 expeditions found that climbers from hierarchical countries had more climbers in groups reach the summit, but also had more climbers die along the way.²⁴ Hierarchy helps groups perform well by clearly defining roles, facilitating coordination and avoiding conflict, especially in stable and well-defined environments. However, rigid hierarchy discourages lower-ranked climbers from speaking up and identifying critical errors or safety concerns. In rapidly changing and extreme conditions like the Himalayas you need the perspective of all the team members to return to base. It is on the way down that most climbers die as extreme fatigue, blurred thinking and harsh conditions take their biggest toll. The findings also showed that cultural values could

Personality and Feedback



Personality refers to individual differences in the way we think, feel and behave. These traits have two genetic components: the **nature** component and the **nurture** component. The degree to which traits are influenced by our genes versus our childhood experiences is still a matter of debate, but it is safe to say that a caring, secure childhood gives a person a great start in life.

Numerous methodologies and models exist for mapping personality. They are widely used in organisations and offer a useful starting point for understanding.

²⁴ (Eric M. Anicich, 2015)

The Five-Factor Model (also known as the BIG Five or the OCEAN/CANOE) is considered one of the most reliable and academically validated models in the world, using dimensions along which all people can be placed, with the majority of people falling in the middle categories.²⁵ The dimensions are: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism.

amongst other factors, Holland’s personality and reckless behaviour played a significant role in the sequence of events that led to the crash. Air Force personnel testified that Holland had a reputation as an aggressive pilot who often broke flight safety and other rules. When confronted with his behaviour by (junior) fellow crewmembers, Holland—on several occasions—laughed them away and called his colleagues ‘Pussies’. Some Air Force colleagues refused to fly with Holland.

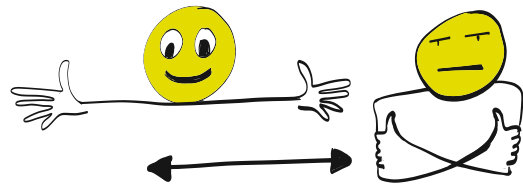
Personality Problems

On a sunny day in June 1994, an Air Force Boeing B-52 Stratofortress crashed at Fairchild Air Force Base in the United States, while practising for a demonstration flight at an air show later that year. Behind the controls was Lt. Col. Arthur ‘Bud’ Holland, who, after a few low passes over the airfield, flew the bomber in a tight left turn around the control tower, where the aircraft stalled beyond control. The B52 bomber crashed, killing Holland and three other crewmembers on board. The crash was captured on video and the sad images were repeatedly shown in the media around the world.

The accident investigation concluded that

Here’s a quick breakdown of these big five personality traits:

1. Openness to Experience



Are you inventive and curious, or consistent and cautious?

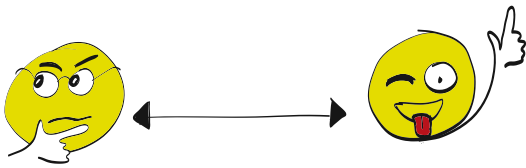
²⁵ (Little, 2014, p. 29)

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Openness reflects the depth of your intellectual curiosity, creativity and preference for novelty and variety over a strict routine. It describes the extent to which you are imaginative and independent.

Those of us with a high level of openness to new experiences are more open to receiving feedback than people who are more routine-based.

2. Conscientiousness



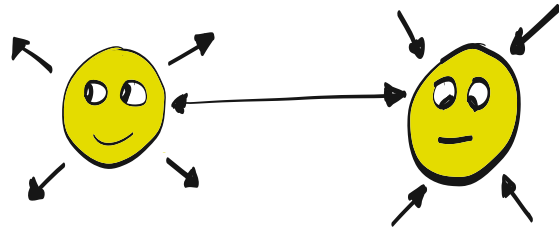
Are you efficient and organised, or easy-going and carefree?

Conscientiousness relates to whether you prefer planned versus spontaneous behaviour and reveals your tendency toward being dependable, showing self-discipline, acting dutifully and aiming for achievement.

Once conscientious people know it's part of their job, they are more likely to

provide feedback; they'll see it as another task to be performed dutifully.

3. Extraversion

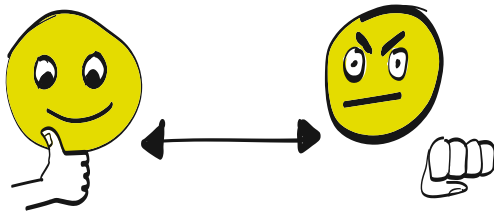


Are you outgoing and energetic, or solitary and reserved?

Extraversion is revealed by your energy, talkativeness, positive emotions, assertiveness, sociability and the tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others.

While receiving feedback, extroverted people are more likely to consider the positive and block out the negative. They also regularly ask clarifying questions and focus on maintaining good relationships.

4. Agreeableness

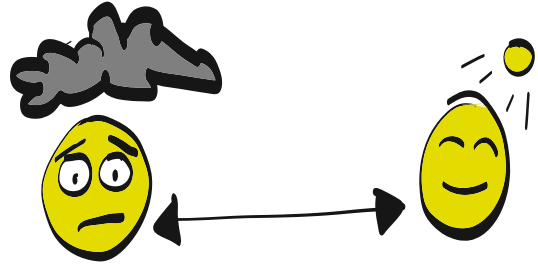


Are you friendly and compassionate, or analytical and detached?

Agreeableness is measured by your tendency to be compassionate, empathetic and cooperative rather than suspicious and antagonistic towards others.

With their compassionate and empathetic natures, highly agreeable people are more likely to build strong and trusting relationships. They tend to begin the feedback process on a positive note, making it easier to deliver messages in a constructive way. They also tend to maintain positive impressions of others, which makes them more likely to accept others' intentions at face value during a feedback session.

5. Neuroticism



Are you sensitive and nervous, or secure and confident?

Neurotic people experience unpleasant emotions easily, including anger, anxiety, depression and chronic stress. Neuroticism describes your degree of emotional stability, self-confidence and impulse control.

Extremely neurotic people, due to their sensitive and insecure nature, will almost certainly feel threatened and experience negative emotions while receiving feedback.

Individuals with higher self-esteem accept positive feedback more readily because it is consistent with their expectations and self-image. They are less disturbed by negative feedback because their high level of self-compassion cushions the impact.

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With any personality test, it is important to keep in mind that humans are too complex to classify into simple types or dimensions. Moreover, as we grow, we change. Personality development is the lifelong process of managing all the part of ourselves—moving from ignorance to competence.

Generations and Feedback



Different generations view—and value—feedback in various ways. In general people often mistakenly think that high experience levels and seniority eliminate the need for further learning and therefore feedback.

- Baby Boomers, the oldest remaining generation in the workplace, tend to see feedback as an assessment of performance; a yearly event where

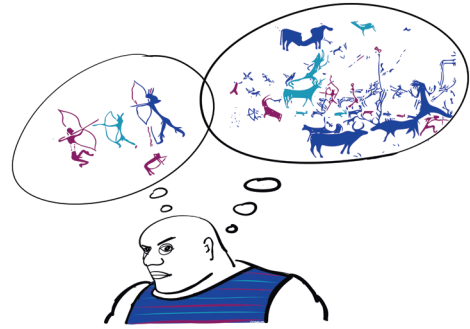
you are judged and receive either a bonus or a penalty. This is by no means something you would want every day.

- Generation X operates in the same way, but the prize is not necessarily money; it can also be freedom and empowerment.
- Generations Y, or Millennials, live in a world of social networking, where asking for and receiving feedback, immediately, is a part of everyday life. You post a question, a picture or a comment and you expect—and often receive—immediate feedback. Because this generation is so used to getting results at the touch of a button, they also require more feedback than any other generation. They see feedback in the workplace as a quick way to learn from personal interactions in an ‘on-demand’ way, which means that they do not often take things personally or feel judged. Millennials genuinely crave tips, suggestions and coaching to improve themselves and get ready for their next position, inside or outside of the

company. They are easily bored and as such, loyalty is to people and projects rather than to the organisation.

- Generation Z, the most formally educated generation and the most technology switched on generation, will have the same feedback expectations as the Millennials, as they enter the workforce over the next years.

Gender and Feedback



Tips for Dealing with the Feedback Generation:

- Acknowledge Millennials' contributions regularly, or correct them immediately if they ought to do something different. In the absence of feedback, millennials typically assume everything is okay.
- Just because they crave feedback does not mean they know how to give it. Social media feedback is fast, simplistic and 'like for like'—not always the type of feedback appropriate for the workplace. All generations need to become more skilful at feedback.

As we explored in our earlier discussion about culture, male assertiveness and motherly care are universal stereotypic portraits, even in highly egalitarian societies. Studies show that men are seen as more strong, aggressive and proactive, whereas women are considered more communal, expressive, gentle and passive than men.²⁶ These stereotypes naturally show up at work, where at least two research studies have found that men and women are given significantly different feedback at work, regardless of whether the manager delivering the feedback is male or female.²⁷ For example, women are more likely to receive vague feedback when it comes to their achievements, good or bad. It seems that men are offered a clearer picture of what they are

²⁶ (Robert J. House, 2004, pp. 348-349)

²⁷ (Turner, 2015)

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doing well and more specific guidance as to what is needed to get to the next level.

On the other hand, women are 2.5 times more likely to get specific critical feedback about an aggressive communication style; a form of expression that is encouraged in men. When women show leadership behaviours such as assertiveness and decisiveness, they tend to be seen as competent but not personable or sympathetic. Those who do adopt a more stereotypically feminine style are liked more, but not seen as strong leaders: a no-win situation.

The Takeaways

- Our mental software is made up of human nature, culture and personality. By being aware of the impact of these three programs we are better prepared to give and receive feedback.
- The influence of human nature on feedback can be understood by looking at four basic universal drives:

- a. The drive to achieve.
 - b. The drive to bond.
 - c. The drive to learn.
 - d. The drive to defend.
- Human biases and stereotypes distort reality, usually in our favour.
 - The words used for feedback can easily trigger defensiveness resulting in aggression, withdrawal or subtler—often unconscious—ways of protecting our self-esteem.
 - National culture subconsciously affects the way we think, feel and act at home and in the office. The GLOBE research programme shows that assertiveness, collectivism, gender egalitarianism and power distance influence feedback behaviour.
 - The OCEAN personality model offers a good starting point to explore the link between feedback and Openness, Conscientiousness,

Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism.

- The younger generations in the workplace today expect feedback to learn and advance fast.
- Universal gender stereotypes and biases make it difficult for women to speak up and fully participate in professional life.
- If we combine the effects of our mental software, we can distinguish 5 behaviours that form barriers to productive feedback:
 - a. Staying silent.
 - b. Confusing opinions with facts.
 - c. Choosing the wrong words.
 - d. Holding on to inflated self-views.
 - e. Defensiveness.

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