

Why feedback doesn't land

Not another delivery model. The argument that feedback is information — and information, on its own, doesn't change what anyone does.

You gave the feedback. It was specific, it was fair, you used the model. Six weeks later nothing has changed, and you are wondering whether to say it again or give up.

The delivery assumption

Almost every feedback framework you have been taught rests on the same idea: that the problem is transmission. Get the words right, choose the moment, describe behaviour rather than character, and the message will arrive intact and the person will act on it.

It is a reasonable-sounding theory and it does not survive contact with your own experience. You can probably think of feedback you received once, in passing, badly phrased, that changed how you work to this day. You can certainly think of feedback delivered impeccably that you nodded at and ignored.

If delivery were the mechanism, that wouldn't happen. Same words, wildly different outcomes — which means the words are not where the action is.

THE ARGUMENT

Feedback is information. Behaviour doesn't update on information — it updates on surprise.

A person is already running a model of how they are doing. Feedback that matches that model gets absorbed and changes nothing. Feedback that contradicts it either updates the model or gets defended against. Which of those two happens is decided almost entirely before you open your mouth.

What decides it

Three things, in roughly this order of importance:

- **Whether the source is trusted.** Not liked — trusted. Does this person have my interests in mind, and do they know enough about my situation for their read to be worth anything? Untrusted feedback is not evaluated; it is explained away, and the explanation is usually about you.
- **Whether it is a surprise.** If they already knew, you have confirmed something and changed nothing. If it is wildly at odds with their self-image, they will reject it to protect the model. The useful zone is the gap in between: close enough to be credible, far enough to require an update.
- **Whether anything follows.** A single instance is an event. Behaviour changes when the same signal recurs in the situation where it applies — which makes feedback a thread, not a meeting.

Threat closes the conversation

David Rock's SCARF model names five things the brain treats as social threats: **status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness** and **fairness**. A poorly set-up piece of feedback can trip all five inside a sentence — it can imply someone is worse than they thought, that their position is now uncertain, that they are being told rather than asked, that they are outside the group, and that the judgement is unjust.

Someone in that state is not weighing your argument. They are managing the threat. Everything they say for the next ten minutes is defence, and you will read it as resistance to the content when it is a response to the conditions.

This is why the same sentence lands from one person and bounces from another. The relationship is not a nicety wrapped around the feedback. It is the thing that determines whether the feedback is heard at all.

Three things that change the odds

1**Ask before you tell**

"How do you think that went?" is not a softener. It tells you what model they are running, which tells you whether your feedback is news. If they name it themselves, your job is much smaller.

2**Be specific about the instance**

"You dominate meetings" is a character verdict and will be argued with. "In Tuesday's review you answered three questions that were put to Priya" is an observation, and observations are harder to dispute.

3**Say what you are for**

Name the outcome you want for them. Not as a preamble to soften the blow, but because it answers the question they are actually asking, which is whether you are on their side.

The sandwich, briefly

Praise, criticism, praise. Everyone has been taught it and everyone can spot it, which is the problem: once someone recognises the shape, the opening compliment becomes a signal that something bad is coming, and you have taught them to distrust your praise as well.

You do not need a structure to make honesty survivable. You need a relationship where honesty is routine — which is built in the ordinary weeks, not in the difficult conversation.

Where there is no trust, feedback is heard as an attack. Where there is trust, criticism is heard as help.

THE PRACTICAL VERSION OF THE ARGUMENT

Same point, different odds

ABSORBED AND FORGOTTEN

"You need to be more strategic."

HAS SOMEWHERE TO GO

"In the board paper you led with the delivery detail. What would it look like to open with the decision you want from them?"

ABSORBED AND FORGOTTEN

"Great job on the launch, really well done."

HAS SOMEWHERE TO GO

"You caught the pricing error two days before launch. That was you reading the detail nobody asked you to read — do that more."

ABSORBED AND FORGOTTEN

"Some people find you a bit blunt."

HAS SOMEWHERE TO GO

"When you said the plan was unworkable, the room went quiet and we lost twenty minutes. What were you trying to achieve in that moment?"

Positive feedback has the same problem

"Well done, great work" is information too, and equally easy to absorb without updating anything. Worse, unspecific praise given routinely stops carrying signal — if everything is great, nothing is.

The version that works names the specific thing and why it mattered. It tells someone which of the many things they did was the one worth repeating, which is genuinely useful and surprisingly rare.

THE MECHANISM, IN ONE LINE

People change what they do when something turns out differently from what they expected, close enough to the real situation to matter, often enough for it to settle. Everything above is an attempt to produce that condition on purpose rather than by luck.

The test of your feedback culture isn't how much you give

It is how much you receive.

Every organisation that decides to “work on feedback” builds training for managers on how to deliver it. Almost none look at the other direction, which is the one that actually tells you whether the culture is real.

If nobody has told you something uncomfortable about how you manage in the last six months, the most likely explanation is not that there was nothing to say. It is that saying it has been quietly established as a bad idea — usually not by anything you did deliberately, but by small reactions you don't remember and they do.

An honest audit

Answer for the last six months. Specific instances only — if you cannot name the occasion, it doesn't count.

- ☐ Someone told me I was wrong about something that mattered, and I can name the occasion.
- ☐ Someone gave me feedback on how I come across, unprompted.
- ☐ I changed a decision because of something a member of my team said.
- ☐ I asked a specific question inviting criticism, and got a real answer rather than a reassurance.
- ☐ Someone in my team disagreed with me in front of other people.
- ☐ I said “you were right and I was wrong” out loud to someone who reports to me.

READING IT

Four or more: people are willing to tell you things. Protect that — it is harder to build than to lose.

Two or three: normal, and worth working on. Start by asking one narrow question rather than a broad invitation.

Nought or one: the silence is the finding. It is very unlikely that there is nothing to say.

THE QUESTION I WILL ASK, AND WHO I WILL ASK IT OF

Narrow beats broad. “What do I do in meetings that makes it harder for you to contribute?” gets an answer; “any feedback for me?” gets a no.

WHERE THIS GOES NEXT

This piece makes the argument. *The difficult conversation planner* is the tool for the specific conversation you are dreading — one page, filled in before you walk in.