Using feedback in coaching

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Introduction

‘That’s really good feedback’ is perhaps one of the most abused and misunderstood phrases. Feedback is omnipresent in everyday life as well as in a professional context, and may therefore appear a deceptively simple and established concept. However, there is more complexity to the topic than may appear at first glance. Psychology researchers have long been concerned with what feedback is, how it works and what the results are. This has produced many studies considering feedback from different perspectives.

Over 15 years ago two authors concluded that there is only a modest link between feedback and performance overall, having reviewed an exhaustive set of over 600 studies. In other words, feedback may not have as much of an impact as we might intuitively think. More worryingly, in the studies reviewed, performance actually declined in one third of the observations, meaning that participants were worse off than they were before they had any feedback (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996).

The authors then scrutinized their data further to investigate what could account for the overall relatively weak effect, and went on subsequently to develop a model for future research and practice. They emphasized that there are many factors that influence feedback processes in different ways, such as the actual content, where feedback comes from, at what time it is received and how the recipient reacts. One of their main conclusions, however, was that we often confuse desirability with usefulness. In other words, most people seem to want feedback, but whether we act on it is another matter.

Thus, this chapter commences with considering the aims and purposes involved in the communication of feedback. Next, I review the psychological research evidence, with reference to the feedback source (the person or entity from which the feedback originates, also called ‘sender’), message and recipient, followed by a separate section on 360-degree feedback. This will lead us to a practical discussion of the implications of existing research for coaches, and in particular the use of goals. Finally, I provide guidelines for
Psychometrics and Feedback

best feedback practice, with specific reference to feeding back results from psychometric tests and psychometric profiles. It is my aim to cater for readers who may be new to the topic (for instance have recently qualified in the BPS test user certificates or a local equivalent) and also to summarize the existing research for the benefit of more experienced readers wishing to benchmark and double check best practice.

The context for feedback

There is not one singular definition of feedback that everyone agrees on. Essentially, the basic feedback process is the relaying of information from one party to another; some would argue that learning is an essential aspect of this information processing. Real-life feedback applications are diverse and linked to different objectives. The general agenda for feedback activities is therefore wide, ranging from the simple conveying of information to purposeful and planned uses for development and review of work-based or indeed other performance (such as educational attainment) to the discussion of malfunction or underperformance.

Feedback activities can be carried out formally (with prior planning or a formal process) or informally (ad hoc). Examples for formal applications include appraisals, development/assessment centres, coaching or 360-degree feedback (McDowall and Mabey, 2008).

As noted elsewhere in this book, coaching is indeed still a growing activity all around the globe, and in itself relies on various feedback-based activities. The coaching process, whilst often initiated via a commissioning client (to whom the coach is accountable) is ultimately based on a one-to-one relationship with the coachee. Feedback is an integral part of the dynamics of this relationship (for a fuller discussion see McDowall and Millward, 2010). For instance, the use of psychometrics and assessments in coaching is widespread, where personality questionnaires are the most commonly used assessment (McDowall and Smewing, 2009; Smeweing and McDowall, 2010). The rationale behind their use is that detailed discussion of one’s natural preferences with an expert feedback giver will enable employees to gain greater insight into their respective strengths and weaknesses. This in turn will allow focused adjustments to workplace behaviour and enable personal, as well as professional, growth.

How does all of this relate to the use of feedback in actual coaching practice? In coaching, too, we utilize feedback both consciously and formally (such as the use of 360-degree feedback tools, and other psychometrics) and in an informal and unstructured manner through the ongoing dialogue with our coachees and clients. Plus, we may also deal with feedback from other sources during any coaching process, such as discussing performance appraisal data. For instance, coaches may be called in to help employees work on development needs that were initially diagnosed in appraisal discussions.
They may then use the feeding back of psychometric profiles to facilitate greater awareness of strengths and weaknesses. Multi-source feedback data can be valuable for coaches, particularly when they need concrete information about work-related behaviours, or when coachees are likely to resist other sources of input – for instance where they might brush off a personality profile as ‘this is not at all like me’. A tangible feedback report, particularly if it contains concrete examples, may appear much more convincing. Whichever tool coaches may be using, it is always of value to give due consideration to how any feedback process may best be facilitated. The coach needs to be aware of the fact that feedback comes in very many guises and ranges from very formal and disciplinary to informal and developmental purposes, and note that coachees may or may not have experienced positive feedback experiences in the past.

I now turn to a basic practice model for feedback to discuss the evidence for the elements involved; which will then be used as a basis to provide suggestions for coaching practice.

The feedback process

As outlined above, the assumption that giving feedback to someone else changes how they behave underpins a whole variety of fundamental organizational, educational and interpersonal processes. The terminology for feedback derives from communications theory and refers to a process where a ‘source’ or ‘sender’ sends a ‘message’, a piece of information, to a ‘recipient’. For feedback to happen and a message to be relayed, the following assumptions need to be met:

- The source (sometimes called ‘sender’) initiates a communication process.
- There is a message that needs to be communicated.
- This message is understood and discussed by sender and recipient.

In coaching, most feedback activities are likely to happen by means of direct communication, whether face-to-face or via Skype or telephone, although coaches may also use written or electronic documentation. Figure 5.1 outlines the basic process.

The feedback source

The feedback source initiates the feedback message, either by agreement with the recipient or unprompted. In a work context this will usually be a coach, manager or co-worker. This feedback might be ‘process-focused’ (‘Can you do this differently?’) or content- and data-focused, such as the discussion of a psychometric profile (McDowall and Millward, 2010). We also get direct feedback from doing something. To illustrate, if we are struggling
to do something, feedback from the task is that ‘this is difficult’, leading to feelings of frustration, or even anger. However, if we do something that comes easily to us, the message might be ‘this is easy’, leading to feelings of satisfaction or pleasure.

It is commonplace for feedback to come not just from one, but from multiple sources. Examples for this are ‘bottom-up’ feedback, where managers get feedback from their staff, or ‘peer feedback’. The latter refers to feedback from people on an equal level, which is increasingly popular both in work and educational settings. Getting feedback from several sources adds an extra layer of complexity, as the various feedback senders may all be saying something entirely different, or they may be expressing a similar core message in different ways.

There is a variety of reasons why messages from different sources may differ in terms of impact. Credible people are likely to have greater effect (see Kluger and DeNisi, 1996 for a full discussion). Indeed, research typically
finds that those who are perceived to be in a position of authority are listened and adhered to (see for example the famous Milgram experiments (1963) or Zimbardo’s observations of participants who took the roles of prisoners and guards (Haney et al, 1973). There are of course other factors, such as to what extent the feedback is actually delivered with a constructive personal style. Sadly, research has much less to say on these.

There is also a link between what the feedback says and where it comes from. A practical study surveying employees of a manufacturing company demonstrated that negative feedback from supervisors was related to poor performance, whereas positive feedback was associated with higher performance (Becker and Klimoski, 1989). Feedback from peers did not have any impact. This is consistent with more recent findings which found that peer feedback has little impact within a 360-degree feedback process (Bailey and Fletcher, 2002). Nevertheless, peer feedback has taken a firm hold not only in organizations but also in educational settings, where pupils and students are increasingly asked to evaluate, and potentially coach, others. The key message from the research is that credible feedback sources and those as seen in authority has high impact, whereas evidence on feedback from peers is more mixed.

The feedback message

The message is the information the sender relays to the recipient (ie, the content of the feedback). In the context of coaching, this could refer to specific content such as a psychometric profile, or feedback on how sessions are generally developing and progressing. In an educational context, the message typically contains ‘formative feedback’, such as tutors’ guidance during personal or group tutorials, or ‘summative feedback’, such as exam or coursework marks. In the coaching relationship however, the feedback message is any information that is given by the coach to the coachee. This may or may not be shared with other parties such as the commissioning client, and hence varies in terms of formality, structure and content.

We should also note that it is an intrinsic part of feedback that this should be a two-way and reciprocal process, as in Figure 5.1. Again, this notion of reciprocity is not acknowledged nearly enough in the psychological literature. Not only are there mutual effects, as having to convey, for example, a difficult decision to an employee may also evoke difficult reactions in the manager in charge of this; there is also bound to be mutual learning. Feeding back psychometric tools is bound to increase coaches’ knowledge of their structure, impact and potentially also their limitations.

A feedback message could equally be informal and unstructured, such as a comment in passing during a coaching session, or a quick catch-up by the coffee machine between manager and subordinate. Overall, it appears that the feedback content matters more than the format. In an educational context, Van Der Pol et al (2007) found that in the context of online peer delivery, feedback is more likely to be taken up if it contains concrete suggestions.
Early research on feedback interventions emphasized the content of the feedback and in particular the ‘sign’ – in other words whether we convey negative or positive information. People remember positive feedback better (Snyder and Cowles, 1979) and it also increases motivation (Deci, 1972). Negative feedback is linked both to negative outcomes such as reduced commitment to the organization (Pearce and Porter, 1986) but also with positive outcomes in the context of staff appraisals (Fletcher and Williams, 1996). Therefore we cannot simply infer that all people will react more positively to praise; we need to take into account that different people may have different reactions. However, there is evidence that people are motivated to see themselves as positively as possible (Anseel and Lievens, 2006) – overall then, everyone will prefer to receive good news about themselves. Feedback intervention theory (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996) also holds that feedback is likely to be more effective if it is directed at the task, rather than at the person, and if there is an appropriate, but not overwhelming level of detail.

In summary, all of us prefer positive feedback, even if sometimes we need to hear criticism to prompt behaviour change. Feedback works better if it is concrete, but not overwhelmingly detailed, and directed at behaviours rather than the person.

The feedback recipient

In the coaching relationship, the feedback recipient is first and foremost the coachee. As discussed before, however, any feedback may also be shared with the commissioning client. This is important, as the feedback message may need to be tailored for different recipients. In general, feedback is interpreted subjectively (Ilgen et al., 1979) as the same feedback message might mean completely different things to different people, and have a different result every time.

How feedback is received depends on many issues and in particular the characteristics of recipients, including their capabilities, how much they believe in these, what kind of goals they have and their self-esteem. Situational factors such as mood swings, distraction through interruptions such as e-mails or mobile phones, or even nutritional habits have not yet been researched enough at work but have been recognized in other fields. Nutrition and hydration for instance have long been recognized by sports coaches as important for performance and recovery (eg, Kovacs et al., 2010). Nutrition in relation to educational performance has come under the spotlight in the UK, and the government is making increased efforts to promote the link between healthy eating and effective learning (eg, Sorhaindo and Feinstein, 2006). Danziger et al. (2011) found that judicial rulings depend on extraneous factors, namely food breaks, where judges deliberate longer and more carefully where they had a snack break. These research findings all highlight that our decisions and the way we think are affected by many factors, some of which might be outside our control. It is important to remain aware of this in our feedback practice.
Individuals who believe that it is important to continuously improve performance (‘need for achievement’) do better if they have a lot of feedback (Steers, 1975). Self-esteem is also important, as individuals with high self-esteem have a more positive self-image, regardless of what feedback they receive (Shrauger and Rosenberg, 1970) – they will raise their game more after positive feedback, and experience less failure following negative feedback than those who have low self-esteem.

Goal setting theory may help to explain these observations. It holds that feedback itself is merely data, which only has an impact if individuals are motivated to direct their attention to goals. The setting of specific as well as difficult goals leads to the best improvements in performance (Locke and Latham, 1990) as these are understood easily and offer a motivational incentive. Regardless of these differences, feedback always needs to be clear and linked to personal goals to be effective in the long term. A wealth of studies reports that goal setting is effective if goals are specific and realistic (eg, Locke and Latham, 1990). Table 5.1 illustrates how the specificity of goals and the level of specificity in feedback interact.

**Table 5.1** Goals and feedback in coaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback in coaching</th>
<th>Goals set within the coaching process</th>
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<td>Specific</td>
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| **Specific**         | Feedback is easily understood by the coachee and results in future learning.  
                       | Example: ‘You need to concentrate on your cold calling techniques to help you improve your sales targets. We will work on this by you attending the team briefing on xxx, you shadowing xx, and measure progress again at the end of this year.’ | Subsequent evaluation of any goals is difficult.  
                       | ‘The evidence from your 360 report shows that one area that we can work on is your effective contribution to team meetings.’ |
| **General**          | Feedback is interpreted within the recipient’s ‘frame of reference’ and unlikely to result in behaviour change.  
                       | Example: ‘You need to become a better at sales and hit your increased target (by 20%) by December this year.’ | Feedback is difficult to interpret and apply for the coachee.  
                       | Example: ‘Your colleagues seem to think you are not doing well, so you need to improve.’ |

Adapted from Ilgen et al, 1979
The implications are that feedback should be explained clearly and relate to future-oriented targets to ensure that it is relevant to individuals and achieves lasting impact – it should not matter as much whether the message is positive or negative. In addition, it is also important that individuals believe that they can actually change things: ‘self-efficacy’ (which pertains to the ‘can do’ aspect of performance) is associated with the achievement of feedback-related goals (Renn and Fedor, 2001).

Finally, it is very important to note that it matters if recipients have a positive attitude to the feedback process itself – so value the act of receiving feedback as such. If they do, then they are likely to be motivated to act as a result of any feedback (Atwater and Brett, 2005).

To sum up at this point, it is important that one of the key purposes of feedback is to strengthen people’s motivation to change as otherwise there will be no lasting impact.

**MSMR or 360-degree feedback**

Perhaps the most comprehensive evidence on feedback stems from studies on multi-source-multi-rater (MSMR) or 360-degree feedback. This entails the planned comparison of ratings from various sources, such as the supervisor, subordinates, peers and also occasionally internal and external customers, on agreed work-based performance dimensions and interpersonal aspects. 360-degree feedback tools can either be bought off the shelf (akin to a psychometric test) or developed as a bespoke tool that is usually based on the organization’s competency framework. Reports are almost always generated from a PC or web-based system, and may contain graphs that show the ratings from different sources on different dimensions as well as structured narratives or free-flowing comments.

360-degree feedback usually comprises and starts off with a self-assessment, using the same format as feedback from other sources. The purpose of the feedback session (which should be conducted by a trained professional) is to explore any gaps between self- and other assessments and to learn from these. This should promote greater learning through the discrepancy of feedback from different sources (Fletcher and Baldry, 1999). Many claims have been made about the effectiveness of 360-degree feedback, but at the very least it should:

- Provide a comprehensive and valid measure of workplace behaviour.
- Prompt people to change, and engage in relevant follow-up development activities through learning from discrepant feedback.
- Provide valuable and unique feedback information from each source.

I will now address whether or not these conditions are always met in reality. To start, using 360-degree feedback systems is not a simple solution to problems associated with traditional one-to-one assessments. Feedback from
several sources may be just as biased, particularly if decisions such as promotions or pay rises hang on the outcomes (Fletcher and Baldry, 1999). The measures also need to be scrutinized and tested just like any other psychometric tool (Fletcher et al, 1998), otherwise we cannot be confident that the results will hold up over time or across employees, and they may in fact not even measure what the organization had intended to measure.

Nevertheless, 360-degree feedback has offered the unique opportunity for comparing the effects of feedback from different sources against how people rate themselves. The evidence suggests that individuals who are self-aware, by being able to see their own strengths and weaknesses in the same way that other people see them, perform better than those who lack this insight (eg, Bass and Yammarino, 1991; Yammarino and Atwater, 1993). So the idea is to raise or corroborate people’s level of self-awareness through multi-source feedback, but I refer back to the earlier observation that these sources may not have equal impact. Feedback from the boss generally has the greatest impact (Bailey and Fletcher, 2002; Gregura et al, 2003) whereas peer ratings may be of limited use as they seem to vary a lot over time (Bailey and Fletcher, 2002).

Brett and Atwater (2001) found that less favourable ratings of the feedback process are related to beliefs that feedback is less accurate and less useful. The authors had examined thoroughly how 360-degree feedback ratings and self/other rating discrepancies related to reactions to feedback, perceptions of feedback accuracy, perceived usefulness of the feedback, and recipients’ receptivity to development. Participants who found feedback less useful were also perceived by a facilitator as less development-focused. So these results question widely held assumptions about 360-degree feedback that negative and discrepant feedback motivates positive change.

Will 360-degree feedback achieve lasting impact? An early study (Hazucha et al, 1993) found that self-awareness increased following participation in 360-degree feedback, and that this in turn was related to career progress. Those who perceived more support from their supervisors put more effort into their development and engaged in more development activities. Not only is such support crucial, but also follow-up, in terms of subsequent evaluation and personal development plans (PDP) and other tools that enable employees to transfer any learning to the workplace (Wimer and Nowack, 1998).

In all, the link between 360-degree feedback and follow-up activities undertaken by those who received the feedback tends to be small (Maurer et al, 2002). A thorough review also found the link between feedback, whether from traditional appraisals or multiple sources, and performance improvements to be negligible (Smither et al, 2005). One potential explanation for this seeming lack of effectiveness could be that, as explained above, people react differently to feedback. A positive self-belief seems to be crucial, in that people actually need to believe that it is within their power to change (Atwater and Brett, 2005; Maurer et al, 2002). It is also important that people react positively to the feedback process (Atwater and Brett,
2005) as a negative attitude makes people reluctant to change their behaviour effectively. Thus, it is important that 360-degree processes are communicated well and buy-in is sought from those involved. Where this is done, managers value the thoroughness of 360-degree feedback compared to other approaches (Mabey, 2001), and particularly appreciate graphical and numerical information (Atwater and Brett, 2006).

Feedback effectiveness improves if processes are followed up and supported by executive coaching. As performance evaluations improve, more and more concrete goals are set and adhered to (Smither et al, 2003). This holds true not only in organizations but also in education (Marsh and Roche, 1997), indicating that coaching is helpful for embedding behaviour change that results from feedback, but also more generally engenders a supportive environment at work.

One issue that is problematic both in 360-degree feedback and in appraisal is who is best placed to rate others. Line or senior managers may have little idea of what an individual actually does on a day-to-day basis. One study found individuals’ self-assessments to be the best predictors of behaviour change (Bailey and Austin, 2006) which implies that we should give as much attention to self-evaluations as to ratings from other sources.

To conclude: 360-degree feedback certainly provides a unique opportunity to compare feedback from different sources, but it is important to ensure that people engage in this feedback process, that self-assessments are an integral part and to treat discrepant negative feedback with sensitivity.

Implications for feedback practice

Summing up at this point, here are some of the most pertinent messages from the research evidence for feeding back in a coaching context:

● The source of the feedback needs to be credible, and different sources have differing levels of impact.

● People like receiving and giving praise but are less comfortable with negative feedback; negative feedback might be seen as less useful and less likely to be taken forward.

● Feedback is more useful where it contains concrete pointers and is linked to goals.

● People react differently to feedback, so there is a need to tailor how we convey it.

● Feedback itself is just ‘data’; it needs to be put in context and linked to goals to have lasting effects.

● There needs to be motivation to take feedback forward.
In essence, we cannot rely on feedback alone to prompt behaviour change; the process needs to be bound into a conducive and two-way process that allows transfer of learning back into the workplace (or back into an educational environment, for instance). The setting of useful goals is vital here.

It certainly matters who gives feedback. Multiple sources provide extra information we can utilize to good effect, particularly where this is off-set against an effective self-assessment. However, we need to corroborate whether any ratings and assessments are accurate. Chances are that the most credible source has the greatest impact. This is important to note for work-based coaches, who need to ensure, a) buy-in from client and coachee to ensure that feedback leads to concrete action, and b) a supportive environment that allows transfer of learning back into the workplace.

Reactions to feedback depend on whether the message is overall positive or negative, on whether people believe they can change, on their underlying capability, and on how useful they think the feedback process is. There also needs to be a real interest in learning and a two-way process. Where does this leave the coach? It is perhaps unrealistic to try and assess all these potential differences before we convey feedback. However, we do need to develop an awareness that these factors matter so that we can investigate further, particularly when a feedback process does not produce desired outcomes.

Any goals set should be benchmarked and followed up by the coachee (and coach) to ensure that learning is transferred to other situations. It is vital that these goals are negotiated in agreement, and not superimposed on coachees, otherwise they may not have the motivation to follow them through.

It is also important that the coach believe that coachees can actually change. Coaches or managers who hold the view that some personal attributes are fixed are less likely to help others change (Heslin et al, 2005). As coaches, we need to shape our own practice to reflect this. We can also train managers to shape their beliefs and thus help them to adapt a more conducive ‘coaching style’.

People in general do not like giving critical feedback (Bond and Anderson, 1987; Tesser and Rosen, 1975). This has two implications for our practice as coaches. First, we need to be comfortable ourselves with conveying critical information to others. Secondly, we need to be aware that coachees may not be aware of any potential counterproductive behaviour due to managers’ reluctance to criticize.

What we seem to be missing at the moment is a simple but effective model for giving feedback. One prevalent model is the ‘sandwich’. This holds that we should give people some good news first, then convey criticism and conclude on a positive note. In practice however, this is not always workable or desirable. To start, there are situations when we are only working with negative information, for instance if results from a
360-degree process entail altogether low ratings and critical comments. Also, the sandwich can seem contrived in practice as many employees are now familiar with it, and know when ‘it’s time for bad news’. Lastly, the sandwich does not engage the recipient of the feedback in the process. As discussed above, self-assessments are an important aspect of the feedback process, and we should incorporate these whenever we can.

Psychological research offers us guidance for best feedback practice. We all have the tendency to attribute success to factors that relate to ourselves and are under our control. Failure however, we tend to attribute to causes external to us and out of our control (Jones and Nisbett, 1972). Plus, we have a tendency to view ourselves more positively than others do; such positive illusions are actually good for our motivation and esteem (Taylor et al., 2003). Thus, we need to be very careful that we back up any criticism with concrete examples, and also take care to direct these at specific behaviours, and not at the person. To illustrate, a statement such as, ‘You don’t seem to listen to others in team meetings as two of your colleagues report in their feedback that you continuously interrupt them’ is more conducive than, ‘You have a disruptive attitude.’

Again, one area that appears to have been largely neglected by academic research is the style of the feedback giver. Feedback processes rely on good interpersonal communication and rapport, and all feedback givers will bring their personal approach to the process. However, we know that most of us are not comfortable with criticism. Some of us may compensate for this by being very soft in the feedback interview, avoiding the core issue. Others may come straight out with the criticism, and appear particularly cruel. It is important that we recognize our own feedback style, and learn mechanisms for adapting this. Regular feedback on our own feedback approach is therefore essential through coaching supervision, peer feedback from colleagues and our own reflective practice.

In addition, there is a danger that we jump to conclusions too quickly, before getting the full picture (Argyris, 1982) when we try to understand feedback messages. Different interpretations of the same set of data are always possible, and we need to ensure that our interpretation is the most appropriate and realistic. Imagine for instance that you would have to convey the following piece of information (a narrative comment from a 360-degree tool that focuses on interpersonal behaviour) to a coachee: ‘You have a lot to contribute to our team meetings as your forward style ensures that you get your points across.’ There are several potential explanations. It is possible that this individual is actually being constructive by making sure that important information is considered in the meetings, which otherwise may take too long or lack focus. It is equally possible that this individual is too forward in his or her communication style and talks in meetings at others’ expense – thus interfering with an effective process. Further evidence is clearly needed here, and the coach would need to elicit several pieces of information, perhaps contrasted against a coachee self-evaluation, to get the full picture.
Feeding back psychometrics

Current professional standards guidelines, such as the ones issued by the BPS Psychological Testing Centre, the European Federation of Psychologists’ Association (EFPA) and the International Test Commission advocate that it is best practice to corroborate the results of any psychometric test with feedback. Feedback can also be legal requirement, as in the UK individuals have a right to view any information held about them under the Data Protection Act (2003). It is therefore an ethical part of testing, and coaching practice, to convey feedback. Therefore the default needs to be that feedback should take place, with some element of personal contact, rather than in purely written form, given also that computer-generated outputs can range from the rather general (the ‘Barnum effect’, where general feedback is interpreted as personal) to the overwhelmingly detailed and specific.

It certainly is unwise to provide coachees, or any other test taker, with numerical information such as standardized scores in a standardized written report, as these can easily be misinterpreted and potentially have damaging effects. Most test publishers have addressed this by also providing candidate reports, which can be shared and omit this information. Thus, it is important that coaches do not overly rely on the profiles themselves, but remain conscious that their value rests with the actual feedback discussion. For instance, individuals may have developed compensatory strategies for natural preferences over time (see Smewing and McDowall, 2010).

Not all feedback instruments are equal in terms of quality and robustness. Any coach or feedback user needs to be sure, and where necessary double check that the instrument used is reliable and valid. In my own practice for instance, I have come across tools that had been used without any or little prior validation; feedback derived from such sources may at best be misleading and at worst could be seriously damaging, particularly if the content is negative.

Bourne (2008) advocated that feedback should be, a) technically accurate, b) originate from a good rapport, c) be ‘owned’ by those involved, and d) a useful trigger for behaviour change. These are sound principles to abide by, to which we would add the following: feedback needs to be flexible and adaptable, and tailored to individual needs. One practical issue arising from this is that computer-generated outputs should always be discussed, and not taken at face value. Another notion is how specific we want and need to be, and ‘knowing when to stop’. Feedback can be overwhelming; too much feedback information is likely to fall flat. Experienced coaches can often gage from data such as a personality profile how someone might react, and such ‘hypotheses’ about the feedback session will be helpful in preparation.

Lastly, we also need to consider who will be party to the feedback, and who has access to information. Commissioning clients might want to know about a coachee’s personality profile for instance, and it needs to be agreed
**TABLE 5.2** Feedback effectiveness for coaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles of good feedback</th>
<th>Implication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The <strong>complexity</strong> is understood</td>
<td>The coach engages in reflective practice, and professional development where appropriate, to ensure best practice.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reliability</strong> and <strong>validity</strong></td>
<td>Coaches ensure they double check any information used such as the robustness of psychometric profiles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective <strong>communication</strong> and <strong>interpersonal</strong> rapport</td>
<td>Coach (and coachee) take active steps to ensure this occurs, for instance through active listening, double checking of information.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Credibility</strong></td>
<td>This depends on the <strong>contracting</strong> of the coaching relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethicality</strong></td>
<td>It is our professional duty to ensure feedback of psychometric results, and to adapt automated reports where necessary and desirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Usefulness</strong> and <strong>follow-up</strong></td>
<td>Any feedback needs to be linked to clear and specific goals, and followed up with action plans.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological ownership</strong></td>
<td>The coachee needs to be in a receptive state, and have motivation and ability to do something as a result of the feedback; the coach needs to believe that the coachee can change.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Awareness</strong> of potential consequences</td>
<td>Negative feedback, particularly if unexpected, can be damaging but there might be instances where ‘strong messages’ are needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptability</strong> and <strong>flexibility</strong></td>
<td>There is no ‘one size fits all’; feedback is context and situation dependent.</td>
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clearly and at the outset of the coaching relationship who will have access to what data in the organization at which points in time. Otherwise, potential breaches of confidentiality, trust and rapport may result.

**Summary**

The overall message from the research available is that we cannot say ‘one size fits all’ as there is no generic model of feedback that is suitable for each and every individual and situation. Feedback is an effective tool in coaching when used wisely however, and feedback is a necessity and not a ‘nice to have’ where psychometrics are involved – it is part of good psychological testing practice to explain and validate results.

We need to be aware that results from feedback vary between different people and situations, and also depend on whether we praise or criticize people. Thus, we need to take a flexible approach and adapt how we give feedback to the specific context. We should ensure that we practice and nurture these skills through regular training, personal development and by reviewing our own feedback style. Feedback is a reciprocal process and should result in effective learning, which includes our own development as coaches.

**Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Wendy Jephson and Graham Walsmley for their helpful comments on the first draft of this chapter.

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Psychometrics and Feedback


