Feedback: The Compass for Your Career—DRAFT

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 "The boss helps to pull you up. Your peers help you to balance yourself to not fall down. Your subordinates are the ones who push you up."— President/CEO, Thai industrial company

"I always ask everyone from the doorman to the chairman what I do well and what I don't do well." – Board member, European bank

If your career is a journey, feedback is your compass. Honest, action-worthy performance feedback from all directions—bosses and subordinates, co-workers and customers, family and your own inner voice—is a necessity to navigate the shifting landscape of 21st-century business. Like a compass, feedback both orients you to your current position, and helps you plot your path forward.

Feedback, essentially, is data. So why is feedback so difficult to process, even for high-level managers and professionals who are constantly absorbing and acting on new information? For one thing, feedback comes from other people. A quantitative reporting of results—billable hours, sales logged—is not feedback. Feedback involves an analysis of performance: not only what was or was not achieved, but why, and how improvements can be made in the future. Only other people can provide this information, which can be stressful. As a social species, people naturally seek to compare themselves with others and monitor the impression we are making. The very importance of other people's opinions of us means that feedback events will naturally carry heavy emotional weight.

The interpersonal nature of feedback also means that feedback is inherently subjective. This places a cognitive load, as well, on feedback events. How accurate is the feedback? How representative? What context might be missing? Feedback is an analysis of job performance that then must itself be analyzed by the recipient.

In addition to the inevitable emotional and cognitive stress of feedback, there is the fact that feedback is most necessary and valuable at the very times that people are feeling most vulnerable: when facing uncertainty, a major decision, or a disconnect between their situation and current abilities. As one executive put it: "If things are going well, if results are there, you don't need feedback. But when you're hitting a headwind, when things are difficult, that's when you need feedback. And that's tough—because you're already in a difficult situation."

This executive—a board member for a German health-services company—was one of 587 interviewed in 2015 by students in Harvard Business School's "How Star Women Succeed" second-year course. Since 2008, students in this and the "Managing Your Own Human Capital" course have interviewed executives worldwide for insights on how they manage their careers. The 2015 interviewees spanned 43 countries. Women were a significant percentage of the sample. This white paper will summarize and analyze the 2015 interviewees' insights and advice around giving and receiving feedback.

The best feedback emerges from longstanding, trust-filled relationships. However, this is a gold standard that cannot always be met, and the career-managing leader cannot afford to ignore feedback from any channel. This paper will focus on how to filter feedback from different groups of people: bosses and subordinates, coworkers and clients, family and self. What is the greatest value of feedback from these

different sources—up and down, internal and external, and the central circle of self and family? What are the biases to watch out for? And how and when can feedback be given to these groups?

North to South: Feedback From Above

Thinking—or Googling—about feedback in the workplace usually brings up the idea of performance reviews, or criticism and praise from the boss. Meeting the expectations of the boss is critical to career success, so this is obviously a crucial source of information. While invaluable in terms of job performance, however, feedback from above is not the be-all and end-all. Bosses have their own agendas, and even the best of them may have a degree of tunnel vision or a natural tendency to overstate the importance of their own and their team's objectives in the overall scheme of things.

Interviewees made a point to distinguish between bosses and mentors as sources of feedback from above. While bosses are concerned primarily with subordinates' immediate goals and success metrics, mentors are concerned with the long-term progress of their protégés' careers. Your boss can tell you how you are performing today. Mentors advise you on how to perform tomorrow. A boss can be a mentor—just as a co-worker can be a friend—but the two roles are distinct, and may at times come into conflict. Sometimes being a good mentor to subordinates means encouraging them to move out of a department or role in which they've served your objectives well. As the CEO of a U.S. software company put it, sometimes doing the right thing by a subordinate can be "good for that person, good for the company, but bad for you."

According to our interviewees, mentors have two particular qualities. First, a mentor is *invested* and *interested* in your career. A mentor finds intrinsic satisfaction in helping a protégé find his or her own path. Mentorship cannot be self-interested. Grooming a promising junior to take on a project that will benefit your own career is development, but not mentorship. Also, mentors must be senior enough to understand both their protégés' strengths, weaknesses, and goals as well as the company or industry in which those protégés are building their careers. Mentors also need the humility and open-mindedness to recognize that the 21st-century global landscape is complex and dynamic, and that the career- and business-building strategies that worked for them yesterday may or may not be effective tomorrow. Like parenting, mentorship is about preparing people for a very unpredictable future.

Interviewees stated over and over that mentoring must be focused on the protégé's goals. It is not about creating a younger version of the mentor, and is less about passing down wisdom and giving advice than it is about prodding, questioning, and listening. A former university president advised, "Be all about the mentee and their goals; listen to truly understand those goals. You have to be someone who's very invested in their success by their means, not by your own means. That's what makes a good mentor." "Your job as a mentor is to help people get the best from themselves," explained the executive vice president of a European energy company. "My experience is that often people don't really know what they want. I like helping people talk through what's important to them. Usually what I spend most of my time doing is, rather than giving black and white advice, to help people really understand themselves, help them find their own way through these things." The president of a financial-services firm added, "The perspective of the people that I'm mentoring and trying to develop, those perspectives are different than mine. Listening to that and trying to appreciate where these people are coming from and what their expectations are is important to giving good advice."

That said, mentors are not mere sounding boards. Mentors choose promising protégés, but at the same time can give candid feedback where improvement is needed. A good mentor "sees what you do not see and asks the hard questions. It may hurt a little, but it's actually good. It helps you reflect," in the words of the CEO of a U.K. telecommunications company. The board chair of a British aerospace company

noted that, in mentorship, "the only agenda is the improvement of someone else by giving clear and helpful feedback by not shying away from the difficult areas, which enables these areas to be discussed and overcome." Another interviewee added, "A mentor has to be able to be really honest. You can't say it's all okay when it's actually not."

Mentors also, by virtue of their seniority, can shine a light on the career path ahead and alert their protégés to logical next steps, potential pitfalls, and career-accelerating shortcuts. The university president quoted above noted that a mentor should "understand what you're doing and help you think to the next step. As your career develops, you only know what you've already seen, so at one point my research was moving along and [my mentor] said, 'It is time for post-docs. This is the time you get them. I will fund them.' He provided the funding for the moments in my career where I needed to take a step up." (This woman's mentor was also a sponsor, or person who was in a position to offer practical help along with feedback and advice. These roles may overlap, but not all mentors are sponsors, and vice versa.) An executive committee member of a global engineering firm described her mentor similarly: "He would plant seeds in my mind about what I could do and let them grow. He'd keep bringing things up, working to get me to take on new opportunities. He would build my confidence by telling me how I was totally capable of taking on the next role. … He saw that I could be a strong leader in the organization, and in his mind, his job was to make sure I got there."

Executives who had mentors praised them to the skies, but how does one attract a mentor? In general, interviewees were dismissive of formal mentorship programs, finding them artificial. The CFO of a global media company pointed out that with such programs, "You can get some different perspectives. But a lot of time, you end up with mismatches, someone isn't a people person or doesn't have the time, they might not be sufficiently senior or understand your area. Then it's kind of a waste of time." Objective, outside feedback, such as coaching (which will be covered in the next section) can be useful, but mentorship requires a deeper knowledge of both the individual protégé and their professional field, as well as some degree of genuine concern and a sense of a long-term relationship. Another executive noted, "You really have to be straight with people and, in order to do that effectively, you have to build a pretty good relationship of trust. You have to invest in the relationship and get to know the person well before providing some of the very direct feedback and guidance."

Interviewees expressed skepticism of formal mentoring programs, but also a desire to mentor promising juniors. "Senior individuals like to take an interest in careers if they like you – especially if they see you are trying to do a good job and see that with their input they can help you," said the CFO quoted above. "Then they get something from it as well – the sense of assisting someone and helping someone navigate their career." However, several executives noted that junior employees often fail to seek out the advice and help of their senior colleagues. The president of a U.S. pharmaceutical company stated, "I am here as much as anyone is willing to and desires to tap into me. Most people don't ask for help. But most people are willing to help when asked than young people realize." His sentiments were echoed by a vice chair of an investment bank, who spoke of being invited to share a pizza with a 23-year-old in her organization: "He expressed an interest in getting to know me. I think young people's biggest mistake is they think we don't want to get to know them." The vice-president of human resources for a paper and packaging company urged junior employees, "Don't be shy! If you get on an elevator with a senior person, introduce yourself, ask them a question, engage with the leaders of the organization. Your careers is a participation sport."

When mentors do find protégés, they are looking for both talent and character. The CEO of a business-services company stated bluntly that "You have to prove you're worth a mentor's time. I won't mentor people without exceptional performance because I don't care. I wouldn't mentor someone who wasn't performing and thought they should make more money. If someone performs and tries to improve himself

constantly, I'll reach out to them." A female board member of an investment bank made paying it forward a requisite for her mentorship: "I try to help loads of women and always require that they help women below them. And if they don't do that then I stop helping them."

Mentor relationships will change over time. The CEO of a gaming company noted that eventually, "The padawan becomes the Jedi … The tragedy is as people mature, you naturally interact slightly less." Other interviewees noted that mentors can become more valuable, not less, as other sources of honest feedback diminish. "As you climb up the ladder, [mentors and sponsors] become more and more important. It gets more and more lonesome as you get close to the top. These people are a huge source of support for you," said a board member of a German healthcare company.

The other source of feedback from above, as noted, is bosses. Feedback from mentors is concerned with the protégé's career progression; feedback from bosses is more about immediate performance and team goals. To maximize the value of feedback from the boss, interviewees strongly advocated taking the lead in soliciting feedback. Waiting for the annual or semiannual performance review isn't sufficient. Instead, regularly communicate with your boss about goals and next steps. "You can never be in front of your boss enough," advised a managing director of a multinational bank, who made a regular practice of reviewing her current skill level and promotion goals with her own boss. "I am much more secure walking into the office everyday knowing the steps and actions I need to take to keep progressing. It is extremely easy to be lazy about self-management when your company has institutionalized promotion schedules and titles." A director at a European energy firm agreed that this can be hard habit to learn: "My way of thinking is that if you do good work the boss will appreciate it, and I will get promoted based on that. But in real life, that does not happen. If you don't ask for something or raise your hand, then nothing will happen."

Another interviewee suggested that lack of feedback from the boss, rather than criticism, is the warning knell: "At the end of the day, you are your hardest task master. You know if you are getting the right support, if you're being pulled through and mentored. If you've been groomed and regularly selected to do interesting things and that stops – you need to have a conversation about why that's the case. And you need to actively look for what's next."

A concern that some executives expressed is that overly directive feedback can have a negative effect on an employee's initiative or sense of ownership over a project. Feedback should be given carefully to avoid this. The aviation CEO recommended letting employees define their own deadlines, for example, instead of "ordering people to do something by a specific date." Rather, she said, "I would go up to them and tell them 'so this needs to be done, what do you think?' I'd hear their opinion and then I'd say 'when do you think you could finish it by?' and once they've made that commitment, it is much easier to hold them accountable for it." Another interviewee concurred, noting that "for every two percent you add to the proposal, you take away five percent of that person's ownership and incentive to get it done. Discretionary energy is the last great productivity engine. If a manager is throttling back their ambition or engagement, that's a huge cost." The vice-president of human resources for a shipping company sounded a similar note: "If you run the races for your athletes, they'll get discouraged. Let them have the limelight, and give them the support and structure they need."

Just as executives didn't wait until their own performance reviews to get in front of the boss, they recommended giving feedback in real time, as well. "If someone walks into a performance review and is surprised, you're not doing your job as an effective leader," said the chief human-resources officer of a health-insurance firm. The senior vice-president of a pharmaceutical company agreed: "It's better to have these conversations as you go as opposed to letting it pile up until the year-end review. Don't put these conversations off and have them more regularly."

Even experienced executives consider it stressful to give negative feedback. One executive recommended "managing your own anxiety. Keeping everything calm and moderate, keeping things reasonable, shutting things down - without dismissing or fudging or deflecting." Emotions should not be allowed to derail a performance conversation, she noted: "Instead of saying 'Forget about it,' say, 'I can see you are upset, would you like to have this conversation at another time?' Always bring it back to the issue. Say, 'Well right now we are talking about you and this issue.' Make sure people feel safe." It is crucial to keep performance conversations objective and non-personal, another interviewee noted: "Focus on the impact of someone's behavior on the business as opposed to the individual's personality. The conversation needs to be about what people do and how it affects the business. Use the conversation to create a common understanding of what needs to change."

South to North: Feedback from Below

Feedback between teams and leaders is a two-way street. Good bosses and mentors not only give useful and insightful feedback, but actively elicit feedback from lower in the organizational ladder. For one thing, doing so creates the trustful and open relationship that enables their own feedback to be heard and acted upon. For another, a team's performance is to a large extent dependent on the quality of its leadership, making two-way feedback a necessity. One executive recommended "Asking the team for feedback" and notes that "I am often checking in with the team about what they need from me. I frame it as, 'How can I help you be more successful?'"

In addition to providing feedback on your leadership performance, members of your team may be aware of information or trends in the company, industry, or wider world that you are not. A board member of a German bank particularly recommended getting feedback and guidance from a company veteran when taking on a new position: "You need an assistant, not a secretary, but rather a dog for the blind. You need somebody that knows the company well and will help you to understand the company and how it works." A board member for an international shipping company noted, "I have a person that works for me that's a junior administrative assistant. She will say if people are happy and if we have an attrition problem. She really taps into the pulse." This same executive also said, "I mentor people more junior, several levels down, to figure out what the vibe is." Asking protégés for advice, particularly on how to appeal to younger customers, was a practice frequently mentioned by interviewees.

However, people are reluctant to give negative feedback to the boss. (Our interviewees regretted this fact—but, notably, did not have much to say about their own experience giving feedback up the organizational ladder.) "There is an invisible wall between you and everyone else," said a U.S.-based entrepreneur and former CEO. "Even if your senior staff really likes you, they are not going to tell you if something is really bothering them." The CFO of a semiconductor manufacturer noted that seeking good feedback should be part of a leader's constant mission: "People do try to convey distorted information all the time. Ask junior people what they are doing … What do outside stakeholders tell you about the company? Ask investor relations. Try to have mentees in lower ranks. You have to make it a cultural principle that if you speak up, you will get rewarded instead of sanctioned. Leaders need to have good self-confidence and not be defensive about criticism."

It is crucial that leaders not only seek out, but *reward* feedback, criticism, and the surfacing of problems. The executive vice-president of human resources for a petroleum company pointed out that employees need to see the benefit of giving feedback upward: "I want them to know that if they share feedback with me, that there are benefits to that. If you give me the feedback, it will benefit both of us – it will make you happier. You have to be able to communicate that there are benefits to open feedback. Nobody will do anything if there aren't benefits to them – even if intangible." Another interviewee emphasized that honesty must be rewarded even when it is difficult. "To get an answer about what's going on with a

project, you have to make sure people are not penalized. When things are bad, you can't freak out about it. It's what Japanese companies implemented with car manufacturing. You reward people that tell the truth and identify a problem." A banking director spoke about how she created a culture of feedback within her team:

> I changed almost the whole team when I arrived. I basically picked all my direct reports on the basis that I trust them to tell me the good, the bad, and the ugly. When they criticize me, I actually celebrate that. When we have all-group meetings once or twice a year, I present examples of behaviors I want to encourage. I use examples of people telling me things that were unpleasant and those conversations leading to better solutions. I use my own self as an example of frankness in giving critical feedback. Mistakes are part of growing and learning.

Getting feedback as the boss requires more than creating a trusting environment and waiting for the helpful comments and critiques to flow in, however. Many interviewees recommended legwork and follow-up to find out what their teams were thinking. The COO of a life-sciences organization said, "I have a few folks within the organization that I can get a good view on what's going on from. If I hear scuttlebutt, I go ask someone what's going on. At staff meetings, if someone is giving an update and someone else rolls their eyes or scoffs, I go ask them afterwards." Other interviewees recommended the "management by walking around" strategy as a way to get past organizational silos. Several executives recommended seeking feedback from levels below those of their own direct reports. A vice-chair at a credit-card company outlined her own feedback-seeking practices:

> In town halls, I make it really clear that I am open not just to questions, but also to criticism and comments. Two other things I do are skip-level meetings and meetings with front line employees. I put together small group of five to six front-line employees from different departments and take them to breakfast. We do ice breakers about what they all do and then get into the discussion of what is going on at the firm. I also talk to certain people - the people who make it their business to find out others' business – to get the pulse of the organization.

Getting good feedback from subordinates requires giving them good feedback and modeling the behavior you would like to encourage. If you aren't comfortable giving feedback, you team won't be, either. In a fast-paced business environment, something will always need to change, or some external change will require new behaviors. Because of this, feedback and course corrections are inevitable, and several executives spoke of the need to normalize the sharing of mistakes and learning opportunities. The president of an Asian bank urges her team to share their missteps with her, often telling them "It's so easy to share success, but I encourage you to share failure." She shares her own mistakes with the team and tries to convey the message that "You win some, you lose some, but you must learn from the failures. Focus on continuous improvement." Bosses who can give insightful feedback find that they get "a reputation for developing people," according to a software CEO. "That's going to attract the best and brightest to you."

People want feedback, one executive pointed out: "Insecurity is the worst thing in professional life, so knowing what is expected is important." While feedback is necessary to reduce anxiety, interviewees also urged managers to be aware that their feedback would be interpreted in light of the power they held. Harsh criticism, or offhand thoughtless comments, could be demoralizing. "Be conscious of the fact that you have power over people's jobs," said the managing director of a human-resources consulting company. "Constructive criticisms will land very hard." A British government official urged leaders to "Understand the shadow you cast," on their teams by their words and actions. "Praise them loudly, and critique them quietly," as a U.S. wine entrepreneur put it.

Feedback should clarify job performance in context. Sometimes underperformance is a result of lack of role clarity: "People often don't mean to drop the ball; they just didn't know it was their ball to pick up!" said the CEO of a U.S. aviation-services company. As the chief strategy officer of a health-services company noted, "Even when I ask my assistant to do something, I explain to her how it will be used and why it's important." Another executive advised: "Ask people how their job is going, what are they interested in, what has lifted them up, what energizes them. I ask them personal questions to get to the heart of what people are bringing to their work. 'What are they loving doing at the moment? If they had a magic wand, what would they make different? What are they proud of? How do you think we're going?'"

Few interviewees spoke about the potential and pitfalls of giving feedback upward, and the skills needed to do so tactfully. Those who did noted that understanding the boss's motivation is key to effective upward feedback. The operations director of a U.S. bank spoke of using her boss's self-image to frame her feedback: "I had a boss who was completely self-interested and wanted to get ahead of his peers, more than letting his team shine. I would tell him 'Here's another approach we can take to this problem that's more efficient and will make you look very good.' That way, I was able to stick to my values, and do the work the way I thought it should be done by understanding what really motivates him and addressing that!"

East to West: External Feedback

Most frequently, we think of giving and receiving feedback in terms of bosses and subordinates. These were the feedback situations our interviewees spoke of most often. However, lateral feedback from peers inside and outside the organization can also be a valuable source of information.

Interviewees spoke of two main sources of external feedback: executive coaches, and customers or clients. Many of the interviewees had relationships with executive coaches and highly recommended them. Like mentors, coaches help their clients to see their job performance in the broader context of their career, and are not directly affected by the career choices of the people they advise. However, while a mentoring relationship is personal and (usually) voluntary, the relationship with a coach is more transactional. Mentors, also, are usually employed by the same organization or industry, while coaches are not. However, what coaches may lack in detailed knowledge of the industry they make up for in objectivity and a deep knowledge of performance psychology. A manager with a U.S. energy firm extolled the benefits of coaching: "Within the past five years I've had a professional coach I've worked with. I wish I had invested in that earlier. Dealing with an actual professional is a world of difference for most managers. They have different techniques you can use and different questions to challenge you to develop leadership skills. Often when you're at the midrange [of your career], this is something that would be really helpful as you develop your leadership style."

Other interviewees recommended using peer-level mentors and friends outside one's own company as a personal board of directors who can offer feedback and advice. The chief human resources officer of a healthcare company, for example, said that after more than 10 years at one firm, "I realized that I was so buried in doing well that I had only built an internal network and outsiders saw me as only a [company] guy." This led him to create a personal advisory board, a practice he recommends to others. External advisors can keep you from developing tunnel vision and seeing your career only through the lens of the promotion path in your organization. Just as mentors can light the way ahead, an external personal board can sweep a floodlight across the current business landscape.

Other sources of external feedback are less reliable, in the eyes of our interviewees. Coaches and personally chosen advisors may be objective, but other sources of external feedback—clients, customers, and constituents—often are not. Customers and clients are the ultimate arbiters of job performance. As

the chair of an Asian oil and gas company noted, "You are not the most important person who defines whether you've succeeded. Your stakeholders, whether it is your customers, shareholders, or community, will say whether you've succeeded or not." However, they are also are primarily concerned with their own needs being met.

Unlike bosses, clients and customers often have little context for how the services and products are created and delivered. They may ask for the impossible, or not know how to articulate what they actually want. Interviewees noted that feedback from clients should be taken seriously, but in context. "The public always wants you, and you have to know how to say 'no'," advised a Canadian politician. Otherwise, she warned, "You get caught up into work, and at the time you think that everything is a crisis." Another executive recommended not taking client feedback on its face, but following up with questions to truly understand the nature of the problem. Others recommended paying attention to nonverbal cues, such "getting feedback in a facial expression or head nod. You're always looking for cues and clues that someone is satisfied with what you delivered as a product," as a non-executive director for an Australian consulting company put it.

External feedback may become more critical as you move up the ladder. As a board member for a European satellite company put it, "In a CEO position, you're subject to all kinds of inputs from insiders and outsiders … Take input from the outside. Do not just live in your own bubble, you constantly have to question. You need to check your ego and be willing to take advice, especially from people outside the company and those below you in the organization."

West to East: Internal Lateral Feedback

Very few interviewees spoke of soliciting internal feedback, from peers and colleagues. One advised: "You need to actively seek out feedback. But you can't just ask your friends. You need to seek out the people who aren't fans of yours and say frankly, 'Why don't you like me?'" The very phrasing of his advice, though, gives a sense of the social risk that can be involved. One executive recalled a bad experience giving feedback to a colleague facing a job decision—her advice was rejected, creating difficulties in the work relationship. "You have to be thoughtful about what people are asking for; they're not asking you to make decisions for them," she reflected. With people in the same organization and on the same level, there can be a thin line between helpful feedback and unacceptable kibitzing.

Interviewees did, however, recommend what might be called "short-term mentorship" with organizational peers. While mentors and coaches give broad-based feedback, peers can be a useful source of information and help to upgrade particular skills. The vice president of human resources at an international shipping company, for example, noted that "You don't need a formal mentor, use situational mentors. For example, if I have a presentation, I go talk to a great presenter." The president of a U.S. energy company said that she "looks for people who can share experiences she didn't have the opportunity to have; other people's day-to-day experiences can help me to navigate my own life." Another interviewee noted, "I am constantly watching people and assessing their skills. When I find someone who is good at something that I want to do, I ask them for advice. When you tell people they did a fabulous job at something and you want to learn from that, you enhance their self-esteem and you're being honest about your motives, so they're happy to help!" Interviewees who sought out "situational mentors" pointed out that colleagues are often flattered and pleased to be asked for advice, and that doing so can lead to an ongoing workplace friendship. Asking a colleague to help you scale up in an area where you lack experience can also be less stressful than asking your boss.

Getting and Giving Feedback in the Inner Circle

Finally, executives spoke about the importance of feedback from their inner circle: their families, and their own assessment of their career progress. Many interviewees spoke about the role that their spouses played in their career decisions. "My family has been very crucial in supporting me. My husband is one of my greatest mentors. He helps me dot my i's and cross my t's," said the founder of a Nigerian college. Spouses were often spoken of as crucial sources of emotional support and strategic advice. A common theme is that spouses often have complementary skills and traits, meaning that your partner may see aspects to a situation that you do not. "Having different mindsets is extremely valuable when you have a problem to solve," as a senior vice president at a U.S. oil and gas company explained.

One of the more interesting findings in the interviews is that children, for the executives who have them, are a source of feedback unlike any other. Children do not care about five-year plans or ultimate life goals. They give you feedback on how you are spending your time, and how it affects your life and theirs, right now. Several interviewees spoke of the feedback they received from their children at crucial moments. The CEO of a publicly traded food and beverage company, debating about whether or not to take a position after some time out of the workforce, said her family felt that she "was a better person when [she] worked." Another was struggling with the decision of whether or not to leave a company she had long worked for. Her daughter told her that she wasn't being herself, and this was the insight that prompted her to make a move. A banking CEO spoke of re-evaluating his career when he was traveling for work a great deal and his four-year-old son asked him why he was home on a Wednesday, explaining, "I thought you only lived here on weekends."

Several interviewees said that they spoke to their children before making major career moves, in order to ensure the family was on board. But valuing feedback from one's children doesn't mean letting a third-grader plan your career strategy. Children's feedback is focused on the present moment, which is a great source of value but also has its drawbacks. As the chief economist of a U.S. reinsurance company noted, "thinking about what I wanted in the long run helped me make those short-term decisions. In the short run [my children] wanted me at their swim meet, but in the long run I was being a role model."

This executive realized that to get feedback from your children is to recognize what feedback you are implicitly giving them. Parents are role models for children, and children are the mirror to their parents. When asked how she defined success, the CEO of a wealth-management company said, "My daughter sees me as her role model and so do her friends. I hope I will manage to empower talented girls to adjust their expectations upwards." Executives, particularly women, were aware that "What you do is what your children would consider normal as it is what they will know all their lives." A bank board member spoke about how she had unconsciously absorbed the template of her parents' household division of labor: "In my childhood home in Greenland, my dad used to cook and my mom did the laundry. I didn't think about that, but it is like I have copy/pasted that into my life now." This realization made her more aware of the unwitting impact parents have on children.

Feedback from Yourself

The most important source of feedback could be from one's self. No one knows your capacities and desires better than you do—but at the same time, people have many cognitive and emotional biases that can lead them to fool themselves. The best-known of these biases are the self-serving kind: inflating our contribution to events, overestimating our abilities, and so on. However, a surprising number of executives spoke of the dangers of negative self-talk, as well. The CFO of an Asian manufacturing company believed that "the only limits on your potential are in your head. We spend a lot of time talking ourselves out of things or making up reasons why we can't do this or achieve that. We need to recognize

that voice in our head - and change it to a more supportive one." Often, the voice in our head was programmed by our own parents. "To be a good leader, you have to have good self-esteem…if you don't have good parents, that can be harder," noted the head of purchasing for a European liquor company. The CEO of a U.S. real-estate company found that therapy helped him resolve some "experiences that create blockages" in his path to leadership.

Interviewees often recommended visual cues and other quantitative measure to avoid loss of objectivity. A managing director of a multinational bank once kept an expensive bottle of wine on her counter with a label reading "To be opened at the earlier of promotion to Managing Director or five years." The deputy CEO of a European hospitality company keeps a notebook with his strategic goals written in it, which he looks at every day to ensure he somehow "moves the needle" on the goal. Another interviewee used visual project planning to keep from being overwhelmed:

> Every time I take on a new assignment or start a new project, I have a tendency to feel a little overwhelmed and stressed at the beginning because I feel like I don't know everything I need to know, and there's so much to do! I doubt my ability to be able to do it all! So I put up visual cues in my office and the conference room where I spend a lot of time that say '30-60-90'. This reminds me that in the next 30 days, I only need to do xyz, and in the next 60 days, I only need to do xyz etc. That way, I break down the problem and tier my learning.

Feedback from all sources may have bias, and self-feedback is no exception. How can this bias be reduced? The research on self-concept is extensive and complicated, and a full summary is beyond the scope of this paper. An important concept to keep in mind is that every person, psychologically, has more than one "self." When you evaluate your own performance, for example, there is the self that is evaluated, and the self that does the judging. The idea of multiple selves is relevant to feedback in two major areas: Determining if you are happy, and assessing your own performance.

According to Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman, happiness is a difficult topic to study because "happiness" can mean different things—most notably, happiness in the moment versus long-term satisfaction over one's life choices. "The second trap is a confusion between experience and memory; basically, it's between being happy in your life, and being happy about your life or happy with your life. And those are two very different concepts, and they're both lumped in the notion of happiness," as Kahneman explained in his TED talk.[1] Kahneman speaks of the "experiencing self," which lives in the moment, with the "remembering self" which judges the value of the experience after the fact. That these two selves may differ greatly in their assessment is summed up in the aphorism "I don't like to write, I like to have written," a statement so immediately relatable that it has been attributed to almost every English-language writer in the past 150 years and is nearly impossible to source.

Kahneman's research shows that people tend to privilege the remembering self. The remembering self is our inner victor, who writes our personal history books. This is not necessarily a bad thing—it is often necessary to defer present happiness for longer-term rewards, and the remembering self helps us do that. However, it is worth noting that your children, spouse, and colleagues all have to live with your experiencing self. It may be unwise to sacrifice too much of the present moment for future happiness, if others are affected by your immediate emotional well-being.

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[1]https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_kahneman_the_riddle_of_experience_vs_memory/transcript?language =en, accessed November 5, 2015.

Another important psychological concept is that of "possible selves." When we ask the question, "Are you performing well?," the implicit comparison in the question is "relative to other people." However, while social comparison is important, what is far more salient is how present performance stacks up not against others, but against the self-generated images of our future self that we are striving to approach or avoid. The notion of possible selves was developed by psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius, who described them thus:

> Possible selves are the ideal selves that we would very much like to become. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming. The possible selves that are hoped for might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self, whereas the dreaded possible selves could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self (p. 954).[2]

Research shows that people perform best on tasks that are relevant to their possible selves. There is greater emotional energy invested in these tasks, for one thing. Tasks that are relevant to the possible self also have, as it were, a well-furnished mental space to move into; individuals have already spent considerable time thinking about, mentally rehearsing, and imagining themselves performing such tasks.[3]

We evaluate our present selves in light of our possible selves. Because other people do not know of our possible selves, feedback from others may sometimes be off the mark or ineffective because the other person is not fully aware of our possible selves. Feedback by definition is concerned with the present self, because that is all that other people can see. It is notable that two of the most valued sources of feedback for our interviewees are mentors and spouses—people with whom it is acceptable to reveal one's ideal self, and even one's feared self. Because mentors and spouses not only know how you are performing, but toward what goal (and away from what feared outcome) their advice is often the most precious.

Everyone has possible selves, but people differ in how complex and robust their possible selves are, and also the extent to which possible selves are based on positive or negative experiences. In the best-case scenario, possible selves are energizing, clearly envisioned, and *realistic*. A person can have a correct self-assessment, but still provide unhelpful self-feedback if the possible selves are unrealistic. The present self is where you are now and the possible self is the destination: Plotting a path to a destination that does not exist is not possible. A person whose ideal self is delusionally strong may be immune to valid criticism. Likewise, a neurotically powerful feared self can keep people from accepting praise or taking necessary risks. A person whose deepest fear is bankruptcy, for example, may be excessively debt-averse.

What About Bad Feedback/Advice?

Feedback—up, down, across, inner, and outer—can be a useful compass on your career path. But what happens when the compass is off? It is common for executives' stories—in this class and in other years—to mention bad advice or feedback. Most frequently, this is in reference to some career decision that the interviewee made that, though ultimately successful, was considered a bad move at the time. Typical phrases include: "some described some of my career choices as suicidal," "people said I was insane," "that it was the worst decision ever and that my career was over," "you're throwing so much away, you'll

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[2] Markus, Hazel, and Paula Nurius. "Possible selves." *American Psychologist* 41, no. 9 (September 1986): 954-969.

[3] Cross, Susan E., and Hazel Rose Markus. 1994. "Self-schemas, possible selves, and competent performance." *Journal of Educational Psychology* 86, no. 3: 423-438.

never get back in the industry." These comments are key moments in the anecdotes, proving that not all feedback is valuable, and that the ability to ignore feedback may also be a crucial part of success.

Many factors can lead feedback to be less than helpful. If feedback is based on an incorrect assumption about a person's job performance, for example, it will obviously be unhelpful. Unfortunately, the job performance of women and minorities is sometimes seen, incorrectly, as inferior to that of white men. A recent paper published in NBER provides evidence that black employees' job performance is monitored more closely than that of their white counterparts. Increased scrutiny leads to increased spotting of errors, for which black workers are more likely to be fired than whites are. Mistakes by minorities are more likely to be noticed, and more likely to be harshly punished.[4] A similar dynamic may be in play for women. As a partner in a U.S.-based consulting company noted, "When a woman fails, it is more memorable. A female partner had to be rolled off a project and everyone said she couldn't get along with the client so it was a personality issue. The excuses that were made for the male partner in a similar situation were very different – everyone said that the client was crazy."

Even when their perceptions are accurate, men may fear giving honest feedback to women. A board member of an automotive company said that getting useful feedback had been difficult for her as her "colleagues were mainly men and tend not to talk frankly to women." A retired female university president noted that men are "afraid of hurting your feelings or afraid you'll cry, so you don't get the advice you're supposed to get. Minorities fail because people aren't being honest enough with them."

The CEO of an aircraft leasing company suggested that women who want good feedback should address men's fear of women's emotions: "Sometimes men won't give women honest assessments – they are afraid that there will be an emotional reaction, and the manager will be perceived as a bully. Even if it is hard to hold back the tears, if a man sees you crying, they will tell other men." He recommended saying something like, "I'm not going to bruise easily; I want to succeed in this company – I want to be part of the success. You need to be honest with me." A female partner in a consulting company used a similar strategy by telling a male mentor that she might get "emotional but it is not directly related to something you have done" before a performance conversation. Another male executive, the CEO of a U.K. finance company, feared women's anger: "The major difference is what it used to be like on the playground. Two boys hit each other and then it is like it never happened. Whereas, the girls would bear a grudge for a considerable period of time."

Even without the complications of gender, it is sometimes necessary to ignore feedback or advice: "You have to be open to criticism from everyone around you, and you have to filter out the nonsense," as the managing partner of a U.S. law firm put it. The CEO of a U.K. search firm sounded a similar note: "There are lots of people who don't like me, and I'm okay with that, because they don't like me because of who they are, not who I am. Often people are angry because they didn't get what they want, not because the leader was bad." Other interviewees spoke of the danger of relying on feedback too heavily, or letting it stifle individuality. "You are a personality, you grow with the job," said a board member of a European insurance company. "Don't just copy others or follow the instructions of others. People want personalities."

Conclusion: Responding to Feedback

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[4] Cavoudis, C. and Lang, K. (2015). "Discrimination and Worker Evaluation," NBER Working Paper No. 21612, http://www.nber.org/papers/w21612, accessed October 20, 2015.

Even when feedback is ultimately rejected, it should be responded to with consideration and gratitude. Receiving feedback can be difficult (people with social anxiety may find even positive feedback stressful), but so is giving feedback. Wise leaders keep this in mind and attend to the feedback giver's psychological comfort, as well as their own. "I take criticism way more seriously [than praise] because I know that it cost the giver of the feedback much more to give it to me," as one interviewee put it.

Many interviewees recommended taking time to reflect after receiving jarring feedback, before choosing a course of action. "If you don't give yourself a little recovery time to process, it's unbearable," said one interviewee. Avoid the temptation to verbally defend yourself. The vice-president of human resources at an athletic-shoe company noted, "Your first response is always defense. You want to argue back. You have to remember you asked them for this." Feedback can be valuable as an indicator even if it is incorrect: "Even if you don't agree with it, you can't argue with the fact that it's being perceived about you," noted the COO of an international gas and oil company.

Interviewees also recommended following up on feedback as a relationship-building technique. "When others give you advice, they are doing a favor. When you use it, you are returning the favor," the CEO of U.S. medical firm put it. The executive director of an Asian I.T. company follows a routine of taking notes during a feedback event and reflecting on it privately, "and then I email or talk by telephone with the colleague to really understand their point of view." Even when interviewees received feedback they ultimately decided to ignore, they recommended following up to contextualize the situation and ensure that the feedback givers did not feel ignored. As one executive related, "A criticism in my 360-degree upward feedback was that I don't listen to personal issues. I explained to the employees that my trade-off is reading my kids a goodnight story and so that means I don't discuss the soccer game with you." Explaining his family priorities to his team humanized the executive in a way that inauthentic small talk would not have. Feedback from all directions is necessary, valuable, difficult, incomplete, and crucial. Because no one person or perspective contains all necessary data and insight, feedback should be sought and questioned from as many sources as possible. The chart below summarizes the sources of feedback discussed in this article.

Source of Feedback	Opportunities	Challenges
Bosses	The boss's perception of your performance is, for most people, a major if not the most important success metric.	Bosses are concerned with your current performance, not with your ultimate career goals; their feedback is about today, not tomorrow.
Mentors	Mentors can help you see the path from where you are to where you want to be.	Mentors are not always abreast of changes in dynamic industry. Like generals, they may have a tendency to fight the last war.
Direct reports	As a manager, your success is dependent on your team—and theirs on you. The team knows what resources, direction, and leadership they need from you.	Employees have a strong motivation to hide negative information and flatter the boss. They will only provide honest feedback if they are rewarded, not punished, for doing so.

Non-direct-report subordinates	These people can often provide valuable information on company mood and morale, gossip, information from the front lines, and may have greater connection to youth culture.	These people may be better as sources of intelligence and information than actual performance feedback.
Clients and customers	As with bosses, the satisfaction of clients and customers is a key success metric. Ignore their feedback at your peril.	Clients and customers often do not fully understand your business constraints and processes, or their own needs. Because of this their feedback often requires follow-up questioning and interpretation in order to be actionable.
Coaches	Coaches can provide objective, disinterested, expert feedback on the skills you currently have and the delta between that and what you need.	Coaches may lack understanding of your particular industry or firm. If they were hired by your company, not you, they may be more concerned with your ability to meet corporate needs than with your own career goals (in other words, coaches may act more like a boss than a mentor).
Personal "board of directors"	Such people can provide information about other companies, industries, and best practices, and help broaden your perspective.	Because these are people you choose, they may reinforce your own biases and become an echo chamber.
Co-workers	Peers can often provide valuable short-term "mentorship" on particular skills.	Peers often have the same perspective on the organization that you do, and hence do not provide an alternate point of view. Also, there are social risks to feedback among peers. An awkward moment can be difficult to overcome.
Parents	Parents provide a person's inner voice: Your beliefs about work, achievement, status, and personal capabilities are all influenced by your parents.	Not all parents provide helpful feedback. If your relationship with your parents was emotionally distant or abusive, therapy or other reflective practices might be necessary.
Spouse	Spouses often provide complementary ways of thinking about a problem—big-picture leaders rely on detail-oriented	This differs from person to person—some executives like to have their spouses involved in their careers, others do not.

	spouses, the risk-averse and risk-attracted balance each other.	
Children	Children see where you are in the moment and can recognize how your present career choices impact your mood—and availability!	Children's viewpoints are necessarily limited in both time and knowledge.
Self	Only you can know if the work you do is your personal best, and whether or not it satisfies you.	People are prone to many biases when evaluating their own happiness and performance.