

# Amplifying Voices: Optimal Feedback Loops

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Updated on 2nd October 2024



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A San Francisco-based executive consultant recounts a conversation he overheard about Steve Jobs' feedback style while at Pixar. Jobs would point to a person in a meeting and ask, "Tell me what's not working at Pixar." He would continue to probe the group for agreement or otherwise. Then he'd look to someone else and ask, "Tell me what's working at Pixar," and begin again.

While his direct style of seeking feedback may not suit every leader or every team, it does prompt us to think more about what constitutes good feedback and how we get it. It is so easy to fall into complacent and ineffective feedback practices (or, none at all, if we are busy or disconnected).

This is at odds with the importance of feedback as a tool for determining the efficacy of any project or initiative and the development of people within organisations. It is also contrary to the belief that we need to give a platform to different viewpoints from diverse groups of people.

So, how can we use feedback to amplify voices and loop insights back into our ways of working?

## Feedback as a Loop

A feedback loop is a process where the outputs of a system are looped back into the system and used as inputs to modify future output. For example, this might involve using customer or team feedback from their experience of an organisation, to create a better product or work environment.

The concept of feedback loops is in many ways inspired by, and central to, biomimicry and regenerative thinking. In healthy living systems, we can observe information transfer coming from all parts of the network to monitor experiences, both positive and negative. In the human organism, this might be anything from pain receptors to taste buds. In a healthy business organisation, this should be a full host of means and networks for checking in with team members, leadership, customers, stakeholders and our environment.

Feedback loops are underpinned by this idea of the cyclical impact of feedback on action, and then in due course, on feedback again. At each stage of the process, the feedback

informs how we build our view of the situation, and then decide on a course of action. In turn, we will receive feedback on our modifications.

There are two types of feedback loops:

- 1. Positive feedback loops** are aimed at moving a system away from its equilibrium to a higher state of operation (for example, team member innovation heightens or creates efficiencies in the way we work)
- 2. Negative feedback loops** intend on regulating a system so that it returns to an equilibrium and corrects deficiencies or issues (for example, a negative customer review may identify where there are opportunities for greater training or a change in process to meet public expectations)

This shows how feedback loops are vital sources of information both internally and externally. In this article, we will be focusing on feedback from teams but hearing from customers or clients (outside of just uptake of your product or service) is equally important.

## When Feedback Amplifies

Feedback is one of the most important tools for improving team well-being and culture by building psychological safety and inclusivity. People need to feel listened to and as having agency in their future at an organisation. Truly listening to our diverse team members is the basis for all-inclusivity. Having an open and honest feedback culture has the double effect of creating trust in leadership and empowering the team.

Feedback from team members is particularly crucial for leaders. We know that self-regulation, reflection, and mindfulness are essential practices of modern transformational leaders. In order to become stronger leaders, we must be able to shift to a space of deep curiosity and let go of the obstacles placed by defensiveness and closure. The ability to reflect on our biases and have the courage to see and take steps to remedy them is often what distinguishes the good from the great.

If brought into action, this type of feedback creates a positive feedback loop moving our leadership styles or ways of working away from a default homeostasis to a new and better position.

Prosci, for example, describes feedback loops as an important part of working through resistance during change processes, allowing us to steer a course and address concerns at an early

stage. Netflix famously operates on a model of candid feedback where anyone can provide [360 review feedback](#) to other people in the organisation, viewable by team leaders.

## **Optimal Feedback Loops**

In our experience, optimal feedback loops have a number of key characteristics:

### **Feedback is fundamentally “part of the process”**

True test-and-learn cultures understand that the only way learning can occur is through feedback. This is why it forms an intrinsic part of any adaptable organisation’s approach to changing circumstances – and a changing world.

Consequently, feedback should be forward-planned into the full range of initiatives that we undertake. From specific team health and wellbeing or diversity, equity & inclusion strategies, to general performance and management, feedback must be understood as intrinsically connected to the success of all our ventures.

### **Feedback is purposeful**

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Often, we schedule one-on-ones and performance reviews without any purposeful approach, but rather as a practice we are obliged to do for administrative purposes and under the direction of check-box forms. This approach does not realise the invaluable potential of feedback.

A [Qualtrics study](#) found that two-thirds of New Zealand and Australian workers consider that their employer listening to their feedback is *very important* and, even more interestingly, engagement scores increased significantly (from 57% to 78%) when this feedback was acted on in a meaningful way.

So, to get the most out of these touchpoints, try being highly intentional in seeking feedback and putting everyone on the same page. Consider:

1. What is the purpose of the feedback?
2. What do you want to know?
3. How will you react to criticism?
4. What are you intending on doing with the feedback?

Set the rules with yourself before seeking feedback. Then, set the rules with the person giving feedback. For example, we often need to make the space for conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusivity – do not expect it to be something that will naturally arise in a feedback conversation. Specifically, express both your desire to know and your willingness to accept feedback on important topics.

## Feedback is amplifying (rather than muffling)

A key goal of positive feedback loops is to amplify voices. When receiving feedback, maintain an open and non-judgmental orientation towards what you are hearing. We do not want to inadvertently muffle the feedback by being closed, defensive or reactive.

As the chairwoman of Starbucks says:

“... you don’t filter feedback based upon if you like the person or don’t like them. There’s no such thing as constructive or nonconstructive. It just is, and you decide if you accept it or not.”

It’s important to understand feedback is a product of the individual experience of another person, rather than an objective analysis. However, by providing the psychological safety and open space for feedback to be given, we can create a culture where sharing feedback is normalised. In turn, you can take feedback from your team and amplify their voices to create meaningful change by reintegrating it with your next actions.

## Feedback is through preferred channels

Technology can be a powerful tool for harnessing feedback and insights on a number of bases:



- It allows you to aggregate and analyse data from a large number of sources (e.g., a whole team survey)
- It facilitates easier touchpoints for providing feedback at different stages in a journey, and
- It can de-personalise and anonymise the feedback process for more candid responses

However, all these positives need to be weighed against the loss of the one-to-one, which many people still feel is deeply central to being listened to. Ideally, feedback loops should contain both of these methods.

UNHCR's innovation service, in their work with communities all over the world, has established [ten steps](#) for establishing an effective feedback mechanism. One important takeaway is to use a community's preferred communication channels.

Similarly, when we are obtaining feedback from our teams, we want to be thinking about what is a preferred method for a person, a group, or an organisation. On the one hand, quick and easy can be appropriate, on the other, in-person and deep dive might be called for, as we truly seek to listen.

So, whether you are reviewing your people leadership style, strengthening your culture of psychological safety and trust, or implementing new initiatives, consider how you can build optimal positive feedback loops, which truly amplify the voices of those around you for a stronger, collaborative, and more inclusive future.

## **Need More Help?**

Keen to find out more about how your organisation can benefit from the power of optimal feedback loops? Performance Frontiers are experts in helping guide leaders to leverage communication practices to flow through and support in the transformation of whole systems. Speak to Lina today about how we can partner with you to nurture the inherent capacity of feedback to amplify voices and loop insights back into your

ways of working.

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