

Revised
Edition



Feedback

REVOLUTION

Building
Relationships
& Boosting
Results

Marjorie M. Mauldin

BOOK EXCERPT

Feedback REVOLUTION

*Building Relationships
& Boosting Results*

Revised Edition Excerpt

Marjorie M. Mauldin



Feedback Revolution
*Building Relationships
& Boosting Results*

Revised Edition

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Introduction

When Peter McLaughlin and I first began talking about the topics of communication and feedback specifically, we quickly realized we had several things in common. We both felt that we were not particularly effective in giving feedback. In fact, we felt that we were pretty bad.

We enjoyed the challenge and the positive results that come with a successful feedback conversation. We wondered why we had not naturally learned to give feedback. We agreed that if we were provided with a roadmap or model for giving feedback, we would have performed much more effectively in such situations. Looking back at particular examples, we both had a sense of delight from the positive encounters, and a sense of dread over the sessions that left us feeling discouraged, beaten down and lackluster.

So why did we begin a project filled with such negative emotion? The answer—both to improve our own feedback skills and to examine what it would take to teach a new perspective and help “turn the opinion tide” that has made feedback a dreaded negative topic.

Who doesn't want to get better? Have you ever known anyone who said, “Nah, I'll just stay mediocre and by the way, I don't want a raise, promotion or exciting project...” Probably not. Our internal drive propels us to strive, learn and improve.

We soon learned that we were not the only people to feel this way. Leaders, managers, employees, athletes, and students all want to perform at their highest level and they want the people they work with to be able to do the same.

Imagine you are in a competition and someone comes to you with 2-3 “secrets” that will give you an edge over the competition. You would be all ears—eager to listen and incorporate the “secrets” into your plan!

So why is it that when our boss comes to us with our Personal Improvement Plan (PIP) we dread the conversation, make up stories about how we are better than they think, and generally stress out about the whole situation? I would venture to say our bosses were not good at giving feedback either.

Most people (like me and Peter) toggle between the continuum of cheerleading (“*Good job,*” “*Great progress,*” “*Keep up the good work!*”) and criticism (“*You had 7 errors in the report,*” “*Your style is abrasive,*” “*Just do your job.*”). Peter and I had not realized that there is a happy medium between the two, and we discovered that we were well-prepared to build out the specifics of that happy medium!

As we developed the best practice model and the skills associated with its 5 steps, we learned that there were two intertwined factors—competence and confidence. When you are competent in a particular skill set (giving feedback)—your competence drives confidence. When you are confident, your approach to a difficult discussion becomes filled with positive emotions, eagerness to dive in, and a flexible attitude to understand and coach—not to blame and shame.

With that realization, we tackled the project of developing not only a manuscript for *Feedback Revolution*, also a training pro-

gram, *iLoveFeedback*[®]. Our work together was exciting, invigorating, challenging and an opportunity to practice the skills we hoped to teach.

With Peter, the Executive Forum team was able to research and better understand the role effective feedback plays in the life of both the organization and its employees. Sadly, Peter—our friend, colleague and mentor—passed away in 2014. He is greatly missed for his intellect, humor, charm and the energy he gave to all of us.

We carry the mantle of our work in Peter’s memory and will be forever grateful to have had the opportunity to work, learn and have fun completing this project. Peter McLaughlin’s legacy is one we are most proud to continue building upon.

Margie Mauldin

Acknowledgements

No book, I've discovered, is written in a vacuum. That certainly applies, as it should, to a book about Feedback!

The process of creating a book is an interesting one—and one that feels a little like, hurry up—now wait. When we hurried, our race was to capture an idea that seemingly came out of nowhere at just the right moment to perfectly illustrate a point. As we waited for the stories, tips, tools and tactics to gel, the process sometimes felt like it would take forever. Keith Ferrell, you were a very patient man when editing early versions of the manuscript and polishing sections as we completed them one by one. Our conference calls always brightened my day—even when my writing didn't!

To Karyn Guilford and Lea Almagno, two of the most skilled business professionals I have ever worked with and who demonstrate the skills in a natural and easy way, my deep appreciation.

Particular thanks to Beth Wolfson and Alana Berland who worked to help guide the development of the *iLoveFeedback*[®] model and training program.

Michele Demark, Karyn Ruth White and Debra Fine, thank you for your coaching and support.

Paul McMurray and Graham Robb, with your trust and active support as Master Trainers and associates we have made a global difference in the world of feedback! I have relied on your skills, research and practical approaches as we continue to evolve our thinking and work together.

Bob and AmyBeth Stewart at BASS Creative worked their magic to create the look and feel of the completed manuscript and cover design.

Special thanks to my family. Mom, Dad who loved and supported me and challenged me to do my best. My sisters, Trixie and Martha, successful entrepreneurs, wonderful women, and my best friends.

Finally, my thanks to our children Abby and Will, who provided a lab for social and behavioral experimentation when you were teenagers, and who have become wonderful, talented and hardworking adults.

And my husband, Manning, thank you for providing stability and support for the roller coaster ride of a small business. Knowing you were there made all the difference!

Love to you all,

Margie

The Feedback Revolution Has Arrived—Just in Time!

The annual performance review is dead! Long live—
Feedback!

But not the feedback we used to know.

Over the past few years, the flurry of companies announcing their abandonment of formal performance reviews and evaluations has become a blizzard. Companies as large and long-lived as GE are eliminating form-driven performance evaluations and their generally perfunctory, ratings-scale approach to evaluation and, more critically, essential communication between managers and direct reports. Organizations and institutions of all sizes are following suit.

While it's still a bit premature to proclaim the annual by-the-numbers performance review to be, like the Wicked Witch of the East, “really most sincerely dead,” there's little doubt that the ritual—and it was a ritual, dreaded by both reviewer and recipient, manager and managed, and rarely effective for either—is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

A relic.

A fossil.

A memory—and not a fond one.

Few management tools and processes were as well-established—and entrenched—as the performance review, yet even fewer were more disliked. Hated would not be too strong a word for the feelings of most managers and employees toward performance evaluations.

The Society for Human Resource Management, in fact, found in 2015 that 95% of survey recipients were unhappy with their employer's approach to evaluating performance. A study from CEB found that 65% of employees felt that the performance review process harmed rather than helped improve their productivity.

I could offer more statistics, but if your work experience has been like mine, I don't need to. Whichever side of the desk we've found ourselves on when the performance review date arrives, we've all experienced the anxiety, trepidation and the irritation that accompanies seeing our year's work reduced to a programmatic set of check-boxes and number-codes on an impersonal form. Or, when in management, having to reduce a year of our direct reports' efforts to a series of tick-marks and numerals.

So good riddance to the ritual!

But what I find missing in most of the press commentary on the performance review's terminal condition is enlightened and thoughtful consideration of what will take its place.

There's talk of replacing the performance review with specialized apps, with more frequent formal "performance conversations," with other processes and tools that, although well-intentioned, risk achieving the same low level of satisfaction—and low level of positive results!—as their antiquated, abandoned antecedents.

What's happened is that in acknowledging the fact that the traditional performance review process has become outmoded, and in seeking its replacement, companies have continued to

focus on process, not purpose. They are looking for a better process, a more effective tool, another system, without looking hard enough at the purpose those processes and tools and systems are intended to accomplish.

This is borne out, in dramatic fashion, by recent studies showing that the removal of the hated performance review often resulted in measurable *declines* in productivity and, equally and perhaps even more dire, manager to employee communication. Something's being overlooked here. As companies look for and test different approaches to replacing the traditional evaluation, they're continuing to overlook what was wrong with the formal performance review in the first place. Replacing one ineffective tool or process with another ultimately ineffective tool or process isn't progress, and it certainly isn't revolutionary.

I would never argue that processes and tools, methodologies and procedures aren't important aspects of operationally effective companies and organizations. I run a company and I know first-hand the necessity and importance of system and methodology. As you'll see in the course of this book, there is a strong methodology to my approach to the *feedback revolution*.

But it's a methodology, not a straightjacket.

Because I also know, same as you, that the place for systematic, standardized approaches is in the systematic elements of the business. The attempt to extend systematization to employee evaluation ignores the fact that employees—and managers—aren't systems.

They're *people*, and rather than expend time, effort and investment in other attempts to create a 21st century version of the traditional performance review in the form of an app, or perform cosmetic surgery and preserve the review by calling it

an “evaluation conversation,” the time has come to focus on the *purpose* of manager to employee communications.

That purpose is not, of course, to produce a numerical or qualitative rating of the employee’s productivity and performance achievements and areas in need of improvement, those ratings-sheets to be passed up the line and filed away in a personnel file.

The real purpose is to ensure that the employee understands her or his strengths, areas for improvement, and contribution to the task at-hand and the company as a whole—her or his *value*, not just evaluation. And that understanding must be communicated, reinforced and adapted to changing circumstances and contexts *constantly*.

I’ve made some sharp comments in this chapter about the error of replacing the formal performance review with regularly scheduled “performance conversations.” My skepticism about the effectiveness of these conversations flows less from their nature, and certainly not from their intent, than from the sense that the conversations should be elements in an evaluation procedure, another *pro forma* approach to employee communication.

The problem is one of mindset, not purpose.

A decade or so ago, a friend who was an executive with Western Union, told me that he spent a portion of every Friday thinking about each of his direct reports. He considered not just their skills and performance in their job, but also what their career goals were, what hopes and dreams drove them, how they were progressing toward achieving those hopes and dreams, how he could help them make progress, and where he could show them how to improve.

My friend’s approach focused on the direct reports as *people* and, as he told me, that focus served to remind him

that *people* are what his job, and every manager's job, is all about. He was a better manager because he spent that time every week thinking about *them*, not himself.

The fact that he did this regularly each Friday, was a discipline and a *commitment*, not a scheduled evaluation requirement. The insights and ideas he generated during those Friday thinking-sessions enabled him to provide better, more effective, and most importantly, *personalized* feedback to his direct reports.

Commitment to the personal is, as this book will unfold, at the heart of the **feedback revolution**, as my Western Union friend knew a decade ago.

In short, the staid, antiquated and ineffective, filed-and-forgotten performance review is best replaced with dynamic and highly effective personal feedback, personally and individually crafted and delivered on an ongoing and near-constant basis. In order to do that, we have to first re-think and in some ways reinvent what we think feedback is, and how we go about providing—and receiving—it.

That's what the **feedback revolution** is all about.

For the **feedback revolution** to be effective and worthwhile, we first need to examine what effective feedback really is—and in doing so discover, as the next chapter shows, that much of what we've thought about feedback has been off-base and some of it outright wrong.

But we'll also be looking at what's right about our attitudes toward feedback and how, with a few adjustments in approach and follow-through, we can begin creating a true **feedback revolution** that delivers truly positive results up and down the lines of communication in our organizations.

To Give Effective Feedback You Need to Know What Effective Feedback Is— And Isn't

It's all very well to speak of replacing ineffective, static, scheduled formal reviews and evaluations with dynamic, lively and productive conversations, dialogues, and communications. For those replacements to work, they must be built around a central, indispensable, constantly practiced and ultimately mastered element . . .

Feedback!

Which should come as no surprise.

Even before you picked up and opened this book, there's a good chance that you've encountered the word in the context of replacing or evolving your evaluation systems.

In fact, "Feedback" is mentioned so constantly in the press coverage and commentary, in management seminars and consulting reports, that it runs the risk of becoming just another piece of jargon, one more buzzword added to the mix. Another bit of . . . *noise*.

That's a shame—and it becomes much more than a shame when those evaluation/review-replacement strategies fail because too little attention was paid to the *content* of those conversations, dialogues and communications. Without deeply and fully addressing the nature of effective feedback, and specifically what *makes* it effective, those strategies are more likely to fail than succeed. Simply saying, “We’re going to add more feedback to our employee communications,” actually says next to nothing. The right and necessary questions haven’t been asked.

What are those questions? Let’s take the most important one first:

- **What do I mean by “Feedback?”**

I’m not the world’s biggest fan of negative examples, but let me take a moment to tell you a few things that real feedback isn’t:

- **Real feedback isn’t a lecture.**
- **Real feedback isn’t a “chewing-out.”**
- **Real feedback isn’t compliments or praise.**
- **Real feedback isn’t a pay raise (or lack of one).**
- **Real feedback isn’t a generic and impersonal “attaboy” or “you need to do better.”**
- **Real feedback isn’t a “bitch session”—it’s not even a bull session!**
- **Real feedback doesn’t pass the buck, place the blame, or let off steam.**
- **Real feedback isn’t saved-up for the next scheduled meeting or conversation.**

-
- **Real feedback isn't a grade on a scale.**
 - **Real feedback isn't a chance to show off, self-aggrandize, win brownie points or earn gratitude.**
 - **Real feedback isn't something you provide because you're expected to; real feedback isn't an item on a check-off list of management responsibilities.**
 - **Real feedback isn't a demand, a command or a reprimand.**

Had enough negatives? I have. And if you're like me, you have spent enough time in business to have experienced bad or less-than-thoughtful managers and superiors, you could probably put together a list twice as long as the one I just offered.

My point is that without giving serious, careful, and in-depth thought and reflection to the nature of the feedback you'll be giving (and receiving), you're already in the position of treating your new approach to employee evaluation and development as a mechanical, *pro forma* exercise. Your "feedback" will carry no genuine content—it *will* carry large, unwanted, and generally negative consequences.

Sound familiar? What is generally considered to be feedback is actually just another file-and-forget bit of managerial noise. Clearly none of us set out to create such a situation any more than the original designers of ratings-scale evaluations set out to create the most dreaded piece of procedure in the organization's toolbox.

So how do we avoid condemning our feedback to this unwanted fate?

As the title suggests, we *revolutionize* our thinking about what real feedback is, how it's crafted, how it's presented and delivered, and how it's practiced on a constant and daily basis.

THINK! It's an Even Better Motto for Feedback Than it is for IBM!

My friend, writer and editor Keith Ferrell, has a story he likes to tell in his speeches to corporate and other audience types. It goes something like this:

At the end of the semester a teacher stood before his class, a stack of marked-up and graded term papers ready to be returned to the students. Staring for a moment at the student's faces—all eager to get their papers back and get on with more important matters like summer vacation—the teacher chose his words carefully.

"You've each had a full semester to gather research and write your papers. After reading them, I want to compliment you on your accomplishments. You're all, as it turns out, smarter than I am."

The students actually perked up at that. It was the first time the teacher had seen interest on their faces in weeks, and he savored the moment before continuing.

"You see," he said before beginning to return the papers, "unlike you, I've always found it necessary, or at least helpful, to *think* before I begin to write."

The point of Keith's story—in addition to the laughter it receives from his audiences—is that the students would undoubtedly see the red marks and low grades as the teacher's feedback on their work, a situation familiar to any of us who've endured a ratings-scale performance review. But the real feedback delivered pointedly and gently by the teacher was the importance of *thought* before writing.

Keep that in mind the next time you receive a bit of communication that seemingly has nothing to say and gives no evidence that its author gave any thought at all to what he or she wasn't saying. And this should be at the top of your mind if *you're* the one behind the communication!

Let's take another look at that definition of feedback that I showed you at the beginning of the book:

Feedback is information that is shared with a person or group for the distinct purpose of improving results and/or relationships. Effective feedback is not venting, blaming, shaming or yielding to excuses.

Having worked hard, along with Peter McLaughlin and other members of our team to develop that definition, I'm proud of every word it contains. There are three words that stand out for me, and do so because I find them missing from most of what is labeled "feedback" in the business world.

The first is: INFORMATION

Every piece of effective feedback has important information at its heart. There is a specific message, containing clearly presented and comprehensible information, being delivered to the feedback recipient.

The second is: PURPOSE

In other words, you have a *reason* for delivering feedback, whatever the specific nature of that feedback may be. There is nothing perfunctory or programmatic about either the feedback itself or its presentation to the employee.

The third: IMPROVING

All information shared and resulting discussion is intended for improvement—not for venting, blaming or shaming.

In the course of this book we'll be looking deeply into these aspects of effective feedback. For now ask yourself about a piece of feedback (or what you may have thought was feedback) that you've delivered (or received). Keeping in mind the notion of distinct purpose, answer these questions:

- **What was the information content of the feedback?**

Could you make a list, however brief, of the specific information, and its relevance to performance or productivity, that the feedback contained?

- **Why was the feedback given?** Did it address a specific situation or need? Did the feedback make absolutely clear why that situation or need was being addressed? Did you and the recipient—or provider if you were the recipient—both fully understand and agree on the feedback's purpose?

Information and Distinct Purpose. Strong, simple words with powerful implications and consequences—and the central effective feedback factors. Only by placing these two factors at the very forefront of *all* of our thinking about feedback, can we begin to create the **feedback revolution** that transforms every aspect of our work place, and the relationships on which those workplaces rest.

As I mentioned, I'm proud of our definition of feedback and I'm confident that as you read and absorb this book and its lessons, you will also come to see how accurate a definition of real, *effective* feedback it is. But I also keep in mind a lesson learned long ago about definitions. The definition of *dam* will tell you what one is: a barrier for retaining water or other substances or, more obscurely, the female parent of an animal. Those definitions don't tell you how to build a dam or for that matter, raise and nurture sheep or goats.



Now that we've defined effective feedback, let's spend the rest of the book looking at how to build it, both in terms of specific one-on-one feedback, and in the larger sense of creating, raising and nurturing, a *feedback revolution* within our organizations and their cultures.

The *iLoveFeedback*[®] Program

Feedback—timely, specific, two-way feedback is among the most effective communications tools we possess. And while we all possess the ability to master the art of giving effective feedback, most of us have not developed the skills necessary to do so. And we lack the skills because most of us don't actually know what the elements of effective feedback are.

The *iLoveFeedback*[®] training program was created to remedy that situation, and to remedy in an enjoyable, inviting and above all, practical way. The program was created to give you the tools you will need to create a ***feedback revolution*** in your organization. The program's purpose is to clear away the fog and misunderstandings that surround feedback as typically practiced and replace them with clarity, tools, and techniques for putting real feedback in place in your organization.

iLoveFeedback[®] is a dynamic half-day workshop that provides individuals with the skills and confidence for providing effective feedback. The program outlines the 5 Best Practice Steps for feedback with clearly-defined learning objectives, real-life application exercises, practical tools to reinforce skills, and tips for successful implementation. *iLoveFeedback*[®] can also be successfully delivered from a virtual platform.

iLoveFeedback[®] rests upon experience, observation and research—every tip, tool or tactic presented has been tested in business and has demonstrated consistent effectiveness in the real world.

About Executive Forum

Executive Forum is a leadership training and development company founded in 1986. We apply our expertise to help clients define success and develop a customized approach to achieve it consistently. We do this by introducing new tools through our Leadership Series®, transferring skills through award-winning training programs, and implementing a proven process for realizing repeatable success through our tailored services. It's an established approach that benefits the organization by empowering individuals with enhanced skills and confidence.

Other programs by Executive Forum

Leadership Series

A speaker series created to strengthen professional leadership skills such as communication, innovation, team-building and strategic planning.

Leadership onDemand®

An eLearning platform designed to deliver innovative leadership development content using a blended learning approach of documents, audio/video files and facilitator guides.

Business Leaders
Praise

Feedback REVOLUTION

Thank heaven! Margie Mauldin has finally declared an end to a 50-year failed experiment in performance “management.” And as one of the wisest, most experienced and most influential practitioners in the field of organization development, she is eminently qualified to lead the replacement revolution – the long-needed norm of skillful, immediate and effective feedback. This book will immediately boost the quality of work and quality of life in every organization that embraces it.

— **Joseph Grenny**

New York Times bestselling co-author of *Crucial Conversations*

Giving feedback has always been seen as something done once a year in the “annual ambush.” Not anymore.

Filled with (relevant) examples, funny anecdotes, and straightforward “how to’s,” *Feedback Revolution* flips the notion of feedback being dreadful on its head.

It provides readers with a blueprint and a set of practical skills to make delivering feedback simple and effective for any employee at any level.

— **Chester Elton**

New York Times bestselling author of *The Carrot Principle* and *All In*

Margie Mauldin’s *Feedback Revolution* is an absolute joy to endorse as it is highly relevant for our times. Filled with wonderful insight and engaging examples about what kinds of performance reviews work and don’t work, Margie has stepped out of the industrial age of critique and review, and elevated us into the knowledge-worker age of purpose-driven feedback focused on people. Every leader and organization today can gain enormously by adopting these measures and transform what used to be a dreaded process into a positive review revolution!

— **Stephen M. R. Covey**

New York Times bestselling author of *The Speed of Trust* and co-author of *Smart Trust*



Marjorie M. Mauldin (Margie), Executive Forum’s owner and president, is an energetic and creative leader. In the past 30 years, Margie has earned the trust of the Denver and the Rocky Mountain Region business community as an entrepreneur, bestselling author and successful business owner. She effectively manages Executive Forum’s extensive national client list which includes; the National Park Service, Internal Revenue Service, United States Agency for International Development, Denver International Airport, Colorado, Arizona, and Idaho State Governments, Integrichain, Ball Aerospace, United Launch Alliance, WOW! Internet Cable and Phone, and Comcast. Galvanizing talented employees and business partners, Margie has created a firm that makes a difference in the lives of leaders. Executive Forum delivers consultative business services and training to over 5,000 people each year.



NOT FOR RESALE