Feedback-Seeking Thinking

Idea In Short

Most organizations treat feedback as something that flows down from a manager once or twice a year. Research on feedback-seeking turns that picture around. It asks what happens when people actively request information about how they are doing, and what that request signals to others in the room. Susan Ashford and her colleagues have studied the motives, costs, and impressions involved for decades, and their findings reshape how managers should think about development. This article explains how feedback-seeking thinking works, why people avoid it, how the people who receive requests respond, and how leaders can make asking safe, specific, and useful without turning it into a performance for the audience.

A new team lead finishes her first big presentation and waits. Her manager says it went fine. Her peers say nothing. She leaves the room unsure whether "fine" means strong, mediocre, or politely silent. Two weeks later, a colleague mentions an issue with the opening that everyone noticed and nobody raised. The information existed. She simply never asked for it.

From giver to seeker

For a long time, writing on feedback focused on managers who deliver it. In 1983, Susan Ashford and Larry Cummings challenged that view. An encyclopedia entry on the topic explains that their research shifted attention from the giver to the receiver, treating feedback as a resource that employees can elicit when they feel uncertain about how well they are performing.1

This shift changes how leaders should think about development. If feedback is only handed down, then quality depends on the manager's attention, memory, and skill. If feedback is also pursued, then every employee becomes a source of information about their own work, and the organization gains many more signals.

The change also alters responsibility. Instead of waiting to be told, people take part in building their own picture of performance. That stance fits roles where goals and expectations shift often, which describes most modern jobs.

Why people ask, and why they hold back

The same entry notes that the obvious reason to seek feedback is to gain performance information and reduce uncertainty, and that other motives also play a part. These include ego defense, ego enhancement, and impression management.

Motives color what people ask. Someone seeking reassurance may phrase a question so that praise is the likely reply, such as "That went well, right?" Someone seeking information asks, "What one change would have made that clearer?" The second question is harder to answer and far more useful.

Fear explains why many people stay silent. Ashford and Northcraft studied impression management in feedback-seeking in a 1992 paper. Their first study tested whether perceived impression-management costs influence a person's decision to seek feedback, and their second examined whether observers use a person's feedback-seeking to form impressions of them.2

In plain terms, people ask less when they think asking will make them look unsure. Leaders who want more feedback must address that fear directly.

The view from the person who gives feedback

Most studies track the seeker. A paper in the Journal of Business and Psychology points out that research has emphasized the seeker, identifying traits and circumstances linked to asking, while far less is known from the source's point of view. The authors predict that the effort a source puts into a feedback episode depends on the source's perception of the seeker's motives.3

This has practical weight. A colleague who believes you are fishing for compliments will give a short, polite answer. A colleague who believes you want to improve will invest time, because the request signals respect for their view.

So the way you ask shapes the quality of what you receive. Explain why you are asking, name the specific area, and show that you will act. These cues convert a social ritual into a working conversation.

Why impressions matter

Asking also shapes how others see you. A working paper by De Stobbeleir, Ashford, and Sully de Luque notes that feedback-seeking is generally considered desirable, that it helps people adapt to changing goals and role expectations, and that attributions about why a person seeks feedback help explain how it affects organizational outcomes.4

In other words, observers read meaning into your behavior. If they believe you ask to learn, your standing may rise. If they believe you ask to look busy or to shift blame, it may fall.

For leaders, the implication is that the same act can help or harm depending on how it reads. Consistency helps. People who ask regularly, specifically, and with visible follow-up build a reputation for learning, and a reputation shapes how later requests are interpreted.

A field that keeps moving

The research has grown since early work. Nujella, De Stobbeleir, and Ashford wrote an update for the Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior in 2016, asking whether the only question is to seek or not to seek.5

The title points to a useful idea. Whether to ask is only the first decision. Leaders also need to consider whom to ask, what to ask, when to ask, and how to ask. Each choice changes the usefulness of the answer.

Feedback-seeking and growth

Feedback-seeking connects closely to the beliefs people hold about ability. Someone who treats talent as fixed tends to see a request for input as a risk, because the answer might expose a limit. Someone who treats skill as developable sees the same request as a shortcut to progress. Leaders who want more asking can therefore work on beliefs as well as on routines.

The link also runs the other way. Each time a person asks, hears something useful, and improves, the belief that skill can grow gets another piece of evidence. Over a year, those small confirmations add up, and the person asks more freely. Organizations can accelerate the cycle by celebrating improvements that began with a request, and by telling the stories openly.

Making asking easier

Start with specific requests. "Any feedback?" invites vague kindness. "Was my recommendation clear in the first two minutes?" invites an answer.

Choose sources who saw the work. A person who observed your meeting can speak to your facilitation. A person who read only the summary cannot. Select people with different views as well, because one source gives a biased sample.

Time requests soon after the event, while memory is fresh, and keep them short. Then close the loop. Tell the person what you changed and thank them. This step is the one most people skip, and it is the one that teaches others that their input matters.

What leaders can model

Leaders set the tone. When a senior person asks, "What is one thing I should do differently in our meetings?" and then changes something, the cost of asking drops for everyone. When a leader reacts badly to critique, the cost rises, and the information stops.

Practical habits help. Ask for feedback publicly now and then. Share one thing you learned from the last round. Thank people who bring bad news. Avoid punishing the messenger, even when the news stings.

Teams can also build routines. A short weekly question, such as "What would make this work better next week?", turns asking into a normal part of the work, and it shifts the emphasis from judgment to improvement.

A hypothetical example

Consider a hypothetical consulting team that gets client scores once a quarter. A project

manager decides to ask each client contact one question after every workshop: "What is one thing we should change before the next session?" She also asks her own team a similar question after each client call.

In the first month, the answers are polite. In the third month, clients mention specifics, such as slides that bury the recommendation and long agendas. The team shortens its decks and agendas, and tells clients what changed. Within two quarters, clients begin volunteering suggestions unprompted. The case is invented, but it shows how repeated, narrow requests with visible follow-up build trust.

Cautions

Seeking feedback is not a substitute for judgment. If you change course after every comment, you lose direction. Weigh sources by what they saw and what they know, and look for patterns across several people.

Avoid using requests as a tactic to appear humble. People notice when asking has no effect, and they stop responding.

Finally, protect the people who give honest input. If a candid answer leads to retaliation or awkwardness, the flow of information will dry up. Make it safe to say what you see, and respond with curiosity.

- 1Feedback seeking
- 2Conveying more (or less) than we realize: the role of impression-management in feedback-seeking
- 3Journal of Business and Psychology article on the feedback source's perspective
- 4How is feedback-seeking behavior interpreted?
- 5To seek or not to seek: recent developments in feedback-seeking literature

Summary

Feedback-seeking thinking treats input as a resource that you pursue and not a verdict that you wait for. People ask when they are uncertain, and they hold back when they fear looking

weak, so leaders must lower the cost of asking. The people who give feedback also matter, since their effort depends on how they read the motives behind a request. Ask narrow questions, pick sources who see your work, and act visibly on what you hear. This week, choose one project, ask two colleagues for one specific improvement, and tell them what you changed afterward so they see the result of their effort.