

# FIXING FEEDBACK

BLAH BLAH  
BLAH...

CAN YOU BE  
MORE SPECIFIC?



GEORGIA MURCH

WILEY

I'm delighted to see Georgia's expertise in delivering constructive feedback now being widely recognised. ~~Early in my career, and when I then reported to Georgia, I experienced her talent in this area, firsthand. Delivering effective feedback is a misunderstood and often downplayed art; and one which we can all grow better at.~~

— **Matthew Chapman**, CEO, ChapmanC

Everything you need to fix feedback is brought together into one powerful package. *Fixing Feedback* is a common sense, plain English guidebook to that most important of interactions — the feedback conversation. Georgia Murch shows us why they are important, the evidence about what works, how to approach them and how to find your flow to a high-performance workplace.

— **Paul Duldig**, Head of University Services  
The University of Melbourne

The journey to remarkable is a revolving dance of three steps forward and two steps back. In robust style, Georgia shows how to construct and enjoy the forward steps and learn from the back steps — and perhaps sidestep them in the future. Georgia provides a wealth of contemporary thinking, accompanied by many personal and professional examples. Read, reflect and try the journey to remarkable.

— **Tim Orton**, Managing Director, The Nous Group

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# **FIXING FEEDBACK**

**GEORGIA MURCH**

**WILEY**

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Office also in Melbourne

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Georgia is obsessed with the power of great communication. She knows how great communication leads to great collaboration and helps create outstanding cultures. She sees the profound impact communication has on the success of businesses. Remarkable conversations make businesses better.

Georgia understands the importance of delivering programs that impact the bottom line. By helping people have constructive conversations, and giving leaders the confidence to lead with ease, Georgia helps businesses become highly productive by leveraging the power of their people.

She's an expert in helping others master the art of conversation. By creating a culture based on trust and respect, she helps create environments that let clever people get on with being clever, so companies can navigate change smoothly, hold on to their brightest sparks and let their leaders spend their time on the things that matter.

Georgia has over 20 years of experience working with public and private organisations of all shapes and sizes, in Australia and overseas. She has worked in consulting, designing and facilitating leadership, cultural change and customer-focused programs. This deep experience means she truly appreciates the diversity and challenge of complex workforces and understands the complexity of managing a business while leading change.

She now works with savvy, fast-paced organisations and leaders to help create remarkable communicators — so remarkable that people can't stop talking about them and things just get done.

Visit [georgiamurch.com](http://georgiamurch.com) to find out more about Georgia, what she does and what she's been thinking about lately. You can also find her on Facebook and Twitter (@GeorgiaMurch), and connect with her on LinkedIn.

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# INTRODUCTION

After more than 20 years working, leading, managing and consulting, it's clear to me that the number one thing that gets in the way of people being awesome is ... being a dick!

Do I really need to explain what 'being a dick' means? I did some research, and apparently 'being a dick' is a common phenomenon. It knows no bounds. It spans nationalities, cultures, industries and disciplines. When I mention the subtitle of this book, the near first thing that people say is, 'I could buy that book for someone I work with'.

We all know people who are not cool to work with. These people often say the wrong thing, lack self-awareness, let their ego walk in the door before they do, and have a natural talent for being a dick. But if we dare to be truly honest, most of us have fallen into the trap of being a lesser version of ourselves. Who hasn't walked away from a situation with regret biting at your heels, saying to yourself something along the lines of, 'What was I thinking?' or 'Why did I say that?' or (my personal favourite) 'Why did I have to be such a dick?'

Throughout the book I'll talk a lot about being a 'remarkable' colleague, leader, person and friend. So what is 'remarkable'? It is most often used to mean extraordinary, exceptional, amazing, wonderful or sensational. Getting to this level often seems near impossible. Being remarkable 100 per cent of the time is impossible. We just need to ask our spouse, parents, kids or close friends to know this is true. Aiming for perfection is not really good for us, so being remarkable, all the time, can seem an unreasonable quest.

What I am talking about when I refer to someone as remarkable is, *remark-able* — as in, that person is so good, in the way they communicate and collaborate, that people can't stop remarking on them, talking about them, referring to them. If we find something remarkable it means we want to talk about it, and in a good way. Being remarkable is the opposite of being a dick.

So how can we recognise those 'opposite' people? Those who are not impressive, amazing or sensational? Some of the obvious clues are when they:

- have too many wines at work functions and lose all ability to operate a moral compass
- give loud feedback across the open-plan office
- bark orders to people around them (especially to people they consider 'under' them)
- call their colleagues losers
- simply can't stop telling others why they are so awesome.

Unfortunately it's more common than not. And being unremarkable is not just about the obvious scenarios. There are also those who:

- don't speak up when someone needs defending
- avoid giving feedback to their team members so they are not given the opportunity to improve
- speak poorly of others behind their backs
- don't do what they say they are going to
- ask for your opinion but never heed your advice

- negotiate poor deals with customers for fear of losing them.

Unremarkable behaviour is anything that pushes people away from communicating and collaborating well with others.

I've researched the stats on disengaged employees. I was once an accountant, and I am fully aware of the costs to individuals and organisations. I've seen the impacts that unremarkable people have. It's not pretty, and unfortunately so many people accept it as the norm. 'Dicks are everywhere', people say with a sigh and resignation, or in frustration and pain.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF BEING A DICK

We will look at the costs and impacts for organisations in the next chapter but firstly is it important to understand the effect that being a dick has on the people around us, and on our ability to inspire and lead others.

- *Dicks are people we avoid.* They push others away with their actions, their inactions or their words. They may not be included in emails, meetings, social gatherings, or asked their opinions and ideas. They may not be aware they are being bypassed, but they are.
- *Dicks are people we don't trust or respect.* Their lack of interest or excessive self-interest, lack of rapport and lack of compassion does not engender trust and respect. It has the opposite effect. When people don't respect you or trust you, good luck building meaningful and fruitful relationships.
- *Dicks are people that don't make the best decisions.* If they think their idea is the best idea, they pretend to include others in decision-making. If their knowledge makes them the only expert, expect flawed decision-making. After all, their truth is only one side of the story; it needs to be combined with other people's truths before the 'real truth' emerges.
- *Dicks are people that find it difficult to influence others.* The lack of inclusion, respect and compassion they demonstrate means it becomes difficult to inspire and influence others. If you can't influence others to get things done, it makes doing your job feel like pushing shit up a hill.
- *Dicks are people that push others away.* Whether they are aware of it or not, they repel others from collaborating and really connecting. When people are focused on themselves first and foremost they can push people away with their directness, 'rightness' and need to win. It comes at a cost.
- *Dicks are people at all levels.* Many people presume that being more senior, continuing to get promotions or being known for their expertise means that they must be remarkable. This is a big ego trap. There are plenty of unremarkable leaders at senior levels.

We've all worked with dicks, and if you are being honest and courageous you'll admit that you've also been one from time to time. I have been a dick at times. I wish I could turn back the clock. What I do know is that with the right self-awareness tools and regular practice, I get better every week, every month, every year. Just ask my friends and family (well, maybe not my ex). Mostly I'm improving. While this book is about tackling the arguably less complicated relationships (being those at work, rather than those close to home), the concepts, ideas and thinking all apply to both.

I could have called this book 'Your guide to becoming a remarkable communicator' or 'Fixing

Feedback: Rewiring the workplace, people's mindsets and productivity', or 'iCommunication: Moving into 21st century communication for organisations and the people'. I don't know about you, but those titles make me sleepy. I've seen them before. I know the content. It's stiff and it's safe and it's stale.

Learning how to build remarkable relationships with people is not easy and it's not a matter of creating a checklist and ticking it off. It's a matter of learning not to *tick others off* by being a dick! It's about being open enough to become remarkable — so remarkable that people can't stop remarking on how enjoyable you are to work with, how they want to get on your projects and be on your team. Because they feel respected and heard. Because they feel valued and can see that they matter.

This book is a personal and professional treasure of insights created to educate you and your organisation about how to become remarkable, high-performing and seriously inspiring. Through giving great feedback and nailing the tough conversations, you can become a truly great person to work with; and by following the same principles, organisations can become truly great places to work.

So don't be a dick! Be remarkable!

# Chapter 1

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## Feedback is broken

In order to deal with people and issues at work we need to communicate. That means having conversations. You can't do a remarkable job without having remarkable conversations. You can't have remarkable relationships without having remarkable conversations.

*New York Times* bestseller *The 4-Hour Workweek* by Tim Ferriss suggests that we can structure our lives to be successful and wealthy by only working four hours a week — it is all about spending your time wisely. Ferriss says that ‘a person's success in life can be measured by the number of uncomfortable conversations he or she is willing to have’. I agree with Ferriss that pushing through your fears and doing the tough stuff is all about getting things done and moving forward. I don't think it needs to be uncomfortable though. There is an easier way.

## It's all about your people

You may know them as high-performing organisations, the best places to work, or employers of choice. Whatever you want to call them, all top organisations are similar in that they each recognise the power of creating and sustaining great cultures, and the power of communicating and collaborating well. They know that their main competitive edge is not their products or services. It's their people. The people behind what they deliver. It's the people that design and make or break the next strategy. It's the people that create motivation and drive within the organisation. It's the people, people, people. Fail to acknowledge people and you're deluding yourself (and doing them a disservice).

Think of the commonalities shared by top organisations with enormous reach. Without an incredible team of innovators, Apple would not be able to launch the Apple Watch or the next iPhone. Facebook would not be able to create such a socially engaging and addictive platform. Without remarkable people behind the scenes Virgin Galactic would not be taking people to space.

Ideas don't create themselves, nor do they implement themselves. Of course most projects have spokespeople and lead directors who drive the vision, marketing and ‘selling’ as they go, but they have a team behind them. Without that team, there's nothing to market or sell.

It's easy to join the dots and say that making the most of your people should be a priority: focus on your people and the business will flourish. But employers can easily lose sight of their people, especially in times of economic stress.

In the 1990s I joined an entrepreneurial, forward-thinking and fast-growing business, HR and recruitment firm Morgan and Banks. One of the largest firms of its kind in the world, Morgan and Banks led from the front in terms of innovation and development. It was workplace utopia. I was in my early twenties and had lots of enthusiasm but little experience. Little did I realise how lucky I was. Whenever I catch up with colleagues from that time we always look back nostalgically. We worked our butts off, we made good money, we loved what we did and we had a ball working with each other. It was like the gold rush days for the corporates.

Geoff Morgan, one of the cofounders, was known for understanding and verbalising the fact that Morgan and Banks's assets (its people) were going up and down the lifts all day. Andrew Banks, the other cofounder, constantly drummed into us Peter Drucker's saying that ‘culture eats strategy for breakfast’. These guys instinctively knew that the value of their business was their people and they

invested in them heavily via fun and powerful inductions, pragmatic and engaging professional development, mentoring programs and annual all-of-business conferences.

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After the business was sold, the focus shifted from the people to the numbers. The conversations and strategy became about needing to improve, grow, cut back, double. We were not used to this. We were used to being asked how to build capability and motivation. Unsurprisingly, productivity decreased and maintaining profits became a challenge. It became difficult to retain the star performers, and people left.

## **YOUR *people* ARE YOUR BIGGEST ASSETS. FOCUS ON THEM AND THE BUSINESS WILL PROSPER.**

Too many companies still haven't figured out that if they want the customer to come first they need to focus on cultivating a happy workplace: it's your people who are dealing with the customers.

Zappos, the largest online shoe retailer in the world, prides itself on its company culture, and it is well known for it. Does it come as any surprise that 75 per cent of purchases are from returning customers? That's an amazing statistic and is part of the reason Zappos was able to grow so quickly. One of its core values is 'deliver WOW through service'. Zappos expects every employee to wow their customers and it does this by giving employees the autonomy to handle situations in any way they see fit.

Another organisation that is gaining more and more attention and success globally right now is Atlassian. Atlassian is a rapidly growing 'software loving' business that has won *Business Review Weekly's* 'Best Place to Work' twice, along with over 50 other awards (including top 20 Fortune Company, Deloitte Best Fast Growing IT and Hewitt's Best Employer) since it started in 2002. Even Dan Pink, author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us*, uses Atlassian as an example in one of his famous TED talks. He says that Atlassian is an 'incredibly cool company' that is focused on motivating its people by giving them autonomy. Pink says too many organisations are basing their decisions on outdated thinking. If we want high-performance cultures the solution is not to entice employees with a sweeter carrot or a bigger stick.

With a dogged focus on values in everything it does with its employees, customers and brand, it's no wonder Atlassian has highly engaged people — and a very successful business with unprecedented growth in an arguably flat economy. It invests heavily in its people and sees the difference it makes. It's Atlassian's edge, and the results speak for themselves.

If we don't invest in our people and give them the feedback they need, we can't expect to have a high-performing business. People won't know what they need to replicate and what they need to improve.

People matter. A lot.

## **The people noise is loud**

We need to get the best from our people so our businesses can thrive. So we get it, right?! Right!

Then why is it that some of the biggest problems we have in organisations are our people? People, our greatest treasure, can also become our greatest liability. 'People noise' can become so loud sometimes that it makes it hard to implement anything. People noise is like white noise ... it's always on in the background until we turn it off.

When I say 'we' I don't mean us or them. I mean you. The leader, the manager, the colleague. If you

see there is something to be done then *you* need to do it. We often wait for someone else to take the lead, have that conversation, or set the tone. No wonder it doesn't happen. As Gandhi said, 'Be the change that you wish to see in the world'.

## **MANAGERS NEED TO *manage*. MANAGING IS MORE ABOUT THE *people issues* THAN ANYTHING ELSE.**

Peter Drucker tells us that most of what we call 'management' consists of making it difficult for people to get their work done. Managers either create the people noise themselves or they don't turn it off when they need to. They don't lead.

The issues that demand most of our time are often the people ones. Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

- You are trying to prepare your weekly report and John pops in to discuss an issue he has with the project leader's style and how it is affecting the team.
- You are delivering a strategy that will improve the productivity of the business but Tom does not want to work with Mary to deliver it. She's just too difficult.
- You are leading Sam's performance review and giving him feedback on his consistently late delivery. You go into a battle about who needs to take responsibility, as he says Jennifer keeps holding him back.
- You want to implement a new system that will provide a smoother approach when working with clients, but half of the team is divided because they will be more dependent on IT and they don't enjoy working with that area of the business.

People noise is our constant whether we recognise it or not. The success of a great strategy and its implementation hinges on how well people work together. Harnessing this power as not just a manager, but as a 'doer', and reducing the people noise makes the process of working together easier and, dare I say, more enjoyable.

The eighth consecutive study on engagement conducted by research company Gallup tells us that the cost of disengaged employees is deemed critical to a company's performance. The statistics are highly compelling. Some examples of a highly engaged workforce where people enjoy coming to work and working with each other suggest that there is:

- 65 per cent less turnover
- 37 per cent less absenteeism
- 48 per cent fewer safety incidents.

It is clear that minimising the people issues and creating a highly engaged workforce makes a difference. We're not talking about satisfaction for its own sake. We are talking about the cost implications of not investing in your people. More about this in chapter 2.

There are three options for dealing with the people noise.

1. *Deal with people noise as it arises.* Nip it in the bud so the spot fires don't become bushfires that end up being overwhelming or near impossible to address.
2. *Deal with it poorly.* Create even more issues by tackling the problems improperly or incompletely, damaging trust and respect in the process through inappropriate or aggressive communication.



3. *Ignore them and hope they will go away.* I call managers who do this ‘broken glass’ managers: they step over the broken glass in the middle of the room in the hope that someone else will clean up the mess. Don't be a broken-glass manager. Get out the brush and shovel and deal with it.

Most managers pick option three and end up sweeping the glass shards under the carpet. The next group takes option two and ‘attacks’ the issue or person and deals with it poorly, only to see that the approach is ineffectual and often makes things worse. That is the behaviour of a dick.

Remarkable managers boldly tackle option one. They handle the complexities as they arise, with candour and kindness, and end up getting things done. People want to work for them.

## **Time poverty — a growing phenomenon**

Time poverty is not having enough time to do all the things you want or need to do. Like a shortage of income, lack of time is a disadvantage for individuals and organisations.

Societally, we have never been busier. There is more to do, higher expectations that we will deliver it perfectly, and greater distraction from devices and social media than we've ever encountered in the past. There is increased competition in all aspects of products and services, ongoing family commitments, financial pressures in a challenged economy, and many people are facing technology overload. No wonder we feel time-poor.

The past ten years have given us a plethora of functional, fun and powerful electronic tools at our disposal. Many of them started out claiming to make our personal and working lives easier. There are electronic scheduling systems, handheld devices, and we have the ability to communicate with anyone, anywhere, at any time. Yet we still struggle to stay organised and focused. It's most likely due to the fact that we have more information to wade through than ever before. It all adds up to more excuses to not address problems when they happen, because we are ‘busy’ wading through our technology.

## WE ARE NOT LEVERAGING TECHNOLOGY

Productivity expert, thought leader and author of *Smart Work* Dermot Crowley says, 'We need more than just new technology to stay organised in the modern workplace. We need new mindsets, new systems and new skills'.

Crowley tells us that a large part of the problem is that we are using twenty-first century technologies, but still using twentieth-century methodologies. He says the main reasons we are so time-poor in this modern era are:

- *We have too many meetings, especially at the senior manager level.* It is not unusual for the modern manager to spend 80 per cent of their core hours in meetings. This leaves little time to read and respond to emails, solve issues, develop strategies and do the thinking to deliver the right outcomes. Weekends and late nights are often taken up getting to the other needs. We are not creating enough time to stop, think and plan.
- *We are drowning in emails.* Six years ago the average senior executive would have 60 emails per day to deal with. Now we are looking at an average of more than 300 per day. This email noise has created an unprecedented communications focus. These emails are a combination of cc's (copying people in), information only, marketing products and services, blogs, personal memos and event requests, just to name a few. No wonder important emails are sometimes hard to find.
- *Our use of technology is disabling our productivity.* While technology has made doing business and connecting with others easier it has also created a sense of urgency that is crippling the way we work. We can communicate with anyone at any time. This is generally seen as hugely advantageous, but it has also created a sense that everything is urgent and important. It is not the case: we just lack the tools and training to see what is urgent and what is important.
- *We procrastinate.* We need to relearn the art of planning what to do and committing to action. We put things off in the hope that they will go away or sort themselves out. It's no surprise they don't and then become much bigger than initially planned, and much more time-intensive — especially things like giving feedback and tackling tough conversations.

We need to learn to confront issues as soon as we see them. How many conversations with people — friends, colleagues and family — become more serious than they need to be because you don't 'nip them in the bud' in the early days? That is, when you first notice the issue or problem, or when something feels not quite right.

The things we let go vary widely: being spoken to rudely, observing someone arrive late, missing a deadline, or your manager cancelling your weekly catch-up again. It can be anything that seems small at the time. You might decide it's not worth worrying about so you let it go because you 'don't sweat the small stuff', or because it has only happened once or twice and you are too nervous to approach the person. Perhaps you deny it will become something bigger, or perhaps you would just prefer to avoid conflict. There are plenty of reasons why we don't have the tough conversations but the point is, there is a downside to sticking your head in the proverbial sand.

Ignoring these issues can be the difference between dealing with a spot fire and fighting a raging

bushfire. The longer we leave it the greater the costs to the business and ourselves.

When we see a spot fire we grab some water and put it out, right? We know that fire is dangerous and it could turn ugly pretty quickly. It's the same when we don't nip problems in the bud.

In 2014 McKinsey put out a white paper called 'Bad to Great: The path to scaling up excellence', which states that the most important factor in leadership excellence is the ability to 'nip it in the bud'. Leaders who are focused on improving behaviour improve organisational performance. Eliminating the negative is the first step in the process. Destructive behaviour — be it selfishness, nastiness, fear, laziness or dishonesty — packs a far bigger punch than constructive behaviour. Furthermore, it damages the bottom line.

## Matrix structures add complexity

As organisations grow so do their complexities. In most organisations this leads to matrix structures, with people working on multiple projects across business lines, often with more than two managers.

About thirty years ago this structure became popular and organisations such as IBM, HP, Citibank, Nestle and Xerox led the way. Today it's not just for big businesses; many small to medium businesses are embracing it, too.

The purpose of these centralised and decentralised structures is to optimise productivity and rise to the modern challenges of managing virtual teams working on multiple projects across cross-functional and global platforms. These structures are also about responding to customers swiftly and efficiently.

For these matrix structures to work they need to be supported by the right structures and systems, plus a different way of managing and leading. Jay Galbraith, expert in matrix management, says in *Designing Matrix Organizations that Actually Work* that 'organization structures do not fail, but management fails at implementing them successfully'. Communication and cooperation are critical to the success of matrix structures, but managers and employees are not often taught how to work well in this environment and aren't equipped to communicate and collaborate effectively.

Think about it as being a bit like Heathrow, one of the busiest airports in the world. Processes and systems are essential but communication is considered an equal partner.

Most of the academic research into the success of matrix structures is not around the design but about the skills and behaviours needed to lead in these environments. Most of the disadvantages come from the way people work together — not from the structure.

Matrixes allow further internal complexities to develop across the silos. As we now have 'information silos' it can increase the layers of bureaucracy: more meetings and slower decision-making with too many stakeholders involved. This also creates more potential opportunities for internal conflict and results in too many cooks stirring the broth.

Having multiple managers creates confusion. Without enough communication it becomes hard to know what your priorities are as everything appears to be important. Who is your direct supervisor? Which project is the priority? When managers and teams are being pushed and pulled it becomes a battle of the fittest, and sometimes the loudest.

Getting control of your team is difficult, especially when you don't have face-to-face or even established relationships. Managers need to learn how to build trust in these situations in order to get things done.

It can be difficult to get an accurate picture of people's real performance. With dual managers it becomes hard for one manager to gather all the facts and information to deliver the most accurate and constructive feedback about performance.

This last point leads well into the next problem. It's one that organisations are aware of, but it is not often discussed or acknowledged.

## Performance reviews are not working

‘Wow! I'm so excited about my performance review.’ Said no-one, ever.

For most people, performance reviews are as enticing as a trip to the dentist.

Why aren't they the tool for performance and development we need them to be? There are several reasons, but these are the main ones that I have observed over the past 20 years of leading and consulting to businesses.

- *The feedback is stale or hidden.* Most people want to avoid the tough conversations so they tend to store them up until the dreaded performance review. Many employers I've spoken to dislike performance reviews as much as their employees do. They become an excuse to avoid discussing things in the moment, as it happens. Or the feedback is delivered but it's hidden in the ‘shit sandwich’ of good point, bad point, good point. Or, worse still, it's mumbled haplessly in the hope that the full impact is uncovered from under the rock.
- *They are full of surprises, and not the good kind.* People tend to avoid tough conversations. Most people are naturally conflict-averse. What this means is that the initial issue presenting as a small problem can become an elephant in the room by the time the review comes around, and it may come as a complete surprise to the recipient. This causes all sorts of flow-on issues with trust and respect, as they were not told at the time, and this ends up having quite a negative impact overall.
- *There is little room for the ‘real truth’.* The real truth is what one person knows *coupled with* what the other person knows. It is two perspectives that create the actual truth of a situation. The review process does not typically allow this to happen, as it is time-poor and ‘tell’ orientated. The numbers and results are typically decided prior to the review, so where is the ‘real truth’ in the process?
- *They highlight our crap.* While some organisations and managers have cottoned on to the power of building on strengths, unfortunately the majority still focus on an individual's skills gap as the main conversation. We only need to look at the work of Martin Seligman, a world leader in positive psychology, to understand that focusing on our weaknesses creates little chance of development and change. They need to be discussed, but not in the spotlight. They should be dealt with during the year.
- *They are too focused on scoring and box-ticking.* In larger organisations, managers typically need to grade you, sometimes on a scale of 1 to 5. We know that people will rarely get a 5, as this will mean an increase in salary or a big bonus. So while an employee might be doing really well, we don't want a budget crisis — so the scores don't truly reflect performance. Don't they say ‘comparison is the killer of joy’? Well, here is a great example. How do you compare yourself to the next person? You can't and you shouldn't. Individuals are unique and have their own talents, so a box-ticking scale is pointless.
- *They are way too time-consuming.* Most managers have many performance reviews to prepare for

and as a result it becomes about getting the job done rather than delivering in the best way possible. It can also build a little resentment in the process. There's no reward for all the invested time and effort when an employee is even further deterred from delivering good work.

- *They are stiff and boring.* Do you remember the feeling of going to your first school dance? How awkward it was in your first formal outfit, seeing your date look as uncomfortable as you but trying to pretend you are all just fine? Our reviews can be similar when they are too formal for an real discussion to take place.

The habit of having valuable conversations so people can be championed and supported to improve is a good thing. There is little evidence that the formal performance review process achieves this. In fact most data suggests the contrary. Quality guru W. Edwards Deming was clearly against them, identifying 'evaluation of performance, merit rating, or annual review' as one of his Seven Deadly Diseases of Management.

Adobe, which produces software including Photoshop, Acrobat, Creative Cloud and the Digital Marketing suite, calculated that annual reviews required 80 000 hours of managers' time each year, the equivalent of 40 fulltime employees. And after all that effort, internal surveys revealed that employees felt less inspired and motivated, and staff turnover increased.

In 2012 the company was bold enough to make a change and got rid of formal appraisals in favour of creating regular 'pulse checks'. This affected 11 000 employees. Since implementing this change Adobe has reported a considerable shift in engagement, culture and productivity. Other reputable organisations have agreed that performance reviews are not working. Accenture, Microsoft, Deloitte and Expedia have all either moved away from the formal systems or made radical changes. Deloitte's research and costing tells us that an annual appraisal for 65 000 staff took 2 million hours. Expedia says it mostly wanted to 'rehumanise' the relationship between employees and bosses.

The Corporate Leadership Council (CLC) produced well-recognised findings in the paper 'Building the High-Performance Workforce'. CLC research tells us that the impact of informal feedback — that is, feedback outside a formal process that is fair and accurate — is likely to improve individual performance by almost 40 per cent. So if we give feedback on the job, near the moment, it will create a shift 40 per cent of the time. That's pretty compelling.

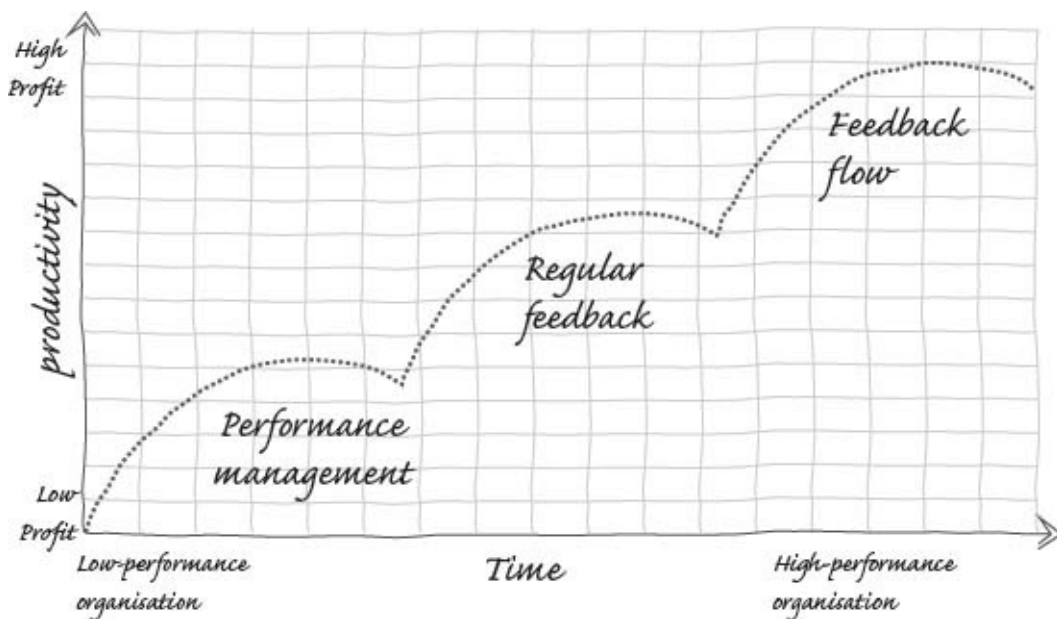
## **It's time to move to the future**

Nelson Jackson was onto it when he said, 'I do not believe you can do today's job with yesterday's methods and be in business tomorrow'.

The concept of 'performance management' was introduced about sixty years ago as a means to determine the wages of an employee based on their performance. It was used to drive behaviours to generate specific outcomes. When employees were solely driven by financial rewards this tended to work well.

In the late 1980s not all employees felt rewarded or motivated by financial gain alone; many were driven by learning and the development of their skills. From here performance management started moving into more frequent monitoring and reviews with a focus on 'regular feedback' outside the formal review process. As organisations put more regular conversations into the mix there was a notable improvement in productivity and employee engagement, when the conversations were handled well.

We are now seeing an emerging trend in high-performing organisations where all employees, not just the leaders, are being taught how to give great feedback and also how to receive feedback with equal candour and grace. Organisations that do this are in their 'feedback flow', as shown in [figure 1.1](#).



[Figure 1.1](#): the feedback flow

The concept of 'flow' proposed by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, a well-known Hungarian psychology professor, is described as being a state in which motivation meets capability. In this space where you are driven to achieve (motivation) and your skills are at the right level (capability), you are in your flow. This creates energy and alignment with the tasks you are doing. It's where action and awareness meet. Flow is good.

Creating a feedback flow is how high-performing organisations get things done and create happy, fully engaged employees and customers. It is where we reverse the push of giving feedback and add to it the pull of receiving it, and alter systems to create an even flow.

So why don't organisations and leaders implement this powerful culture of feedback? There are three main reasons holding them back:

- Organisations don't muster the courage to invest in their people and culture. They are stuck in the 1940s and they just don't get it. As a result, these are not high-performing companies.
- Even for those that value and encourage feedback it is still not translating into action, or the actions are often damaging. The intent may be good, but intent is not seen or measured. We are still avoiding conversations or handling them poorly, no matter how much training we receive.
- People think the change will be too hard and too disruptive. Creating a cultural shift requires effort, but taking out a layer of processes and systems that use considerable time for little or no result will free up time to focus on actual improvement.

We often blame the organisation and its leaders for failures in feedback and get stuck in what I call 'the blame trap'. Getting stuck in the blame trap means we blame others, organisations and leaders and do not take any responsibility ourselves. It's not a healthy space, nor does it allow anyone to move forward.

## Remarkable leaders

Leaders are not just those with impressive titles. They are not just those who manage people or have lots of letters after their names. Yes, they may have people reporting to them. They may be in senior roles within an organisation, but they may not. Leadership is about social influence — being able to secure the support or assistance of other people in order to accomplish something. This description of leadership doesn't make reference to 'leading people' or 'being in a senior role'. Leadership is less about hierarchy and more about influencing others to get things done.

A leader can be someone who works in Accounts Payable who decides who gets paid and who doesn't and builds relationships with suppliers and internal colleagues in the process. A leader can be a product developer who deals with researchers, customers, IT, sales and other areas to come up with the best ideas and products to launch.

**EVERYONE works WITH SOMEONE. EVERYONE collaborates WITH SOMEONE. EVERYONE communicates WITH SOMEONE. WE ARE ALL LEADERS. WE JUST DON'T ALWAYS SEE IT THAT WAY.**

When you think about the structure of an organisation, those that lead people are the minority. While they occupy the top of the triangle they represent, their segment is the smallest part of the organisation. So if we arm only the leaders with the tools and training to become remarkable then we are missing a very large component of the business (and arguably one that will drive the most change). Everyone within an organisation needs to take responsibility, no matter what role they play.

Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzler, the authors of *Crucial Conversations* and the cofounders of VitalSmarts, conducted 25 years of research involving thousands of people and hundreds of organisations. The findings suggest that the most influential individuals are those who get things done, are able to build good relationships *and* master the tough conversations.

It is leaders (whether they manage people or not) who influence projects, thinking and the implementation of ideas. If you want to influence effectively, you need to become a leader.

The research looked at both high- and low-performing organisations. Typically, low-performing organisations ignored poor performers and had a workforce where people didn't hold each other accountable. Meanwhile, high-performing organisations tended to have a culture where managers dealt with issues as they arose and discussed problems before they flared up.

You may have heard the adage 'a fish rots from the head'. You can equate this to the leadership of a business. A business will rot if the leaders at the top are not inspiring, trustworthy, or strategic enough. So we do need to focus on them — but not in isolation. We need to focus on the other leaders in the business, too.

Everyone who connects with someone is a potential leader. So unless you are in an isolated basement working on something that requires no interaction with anyone else, this is for you. Expecting others to change so that the culture can improve, without taking ownership yourself, is being a dick.

Just because you become a parent doesn't mean you are a good one. Just because you are a doctor and deal with people all day does not mean you have a great bedside manner. Just because you speak at functions does not mean you do it well. The same goes for leadership. Just because you lead people on projects does not mean you influence people well. We need to learn to develop the talent and skills of leading remarkably, and having the tough conversations, so things get done with ease and enjoyment.

Gandhi knew this when he said: 'I suppose leadership at one time meant muscles; but today it means getting along with people'. Bill Gates knows it too: 'As we look ahead into the next century, leaders

will be those who empower others’.

Everyone needs to lead the charge when it comes to influencing outstanding cultures and change. You don't fight a war with only the leaders equipped with armour and weapons, so why would you assume that only leaders need to be remarkable? It's impossible to win the battle without everyone taking up arms..

## Fixing feedback

Fixing feedback is about creating a cultural cadence. It's more than feedback training. It's about creating a self-sustaining flow that feeds itself and becomes effortless. The onus is on both parties: one to deliver the feedback, in real time, and the other to receive it well, in the moment. The outcome of this will:

- eliminate dependence on performance management systems
- significantly improve productivity
- create a culture of accountability and commitment
- evolve authentic transparency and openness
- allow individuals to own their own development.

When we create a frequency of accountability that feeds itself, giving and receiving becomes an inevitable part of the way you do business. You *and* the organisation are in your flow. You and your people become remarkable and no-one can stop talking about it.

### YOUR CHEAT SHEET

- You can't do a remarkable job without having remarkable conversations.
- All top organisations are similar in that they each recognise the power of creating and sustaining great cultures, and the power of communicating and collaborating well.
- The success of a great strategy and its implementation hinges on how well people work together.
- Remarkable managers deal with issues as they arise, and end up getting things done.
- We need to learn to confront issues as soon as we see them. The longer we leave them the greater the costs to the business and ourselves.
- Communication and cooperation are critical in complex structures, but people are often not equipped to communicate and collaborate effectively.
- There is little evidence that formal performance reviews work. The habit of having regular and constructive conversations is key.
- In many high-performing organisations all employees, not just the leaders, are being taught how to give great feedback and how to receive it.
- Leadership is about influence. The most influential individuals are those who get things done, are able to build good relationships *and* master the tough conversations.



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