Leadership is a complex skill—one that is not learned by simple directives. Indeed, many people consider it an art form. When individuals lead, they are the instrument—leadership is done through their behaviors, physical presence, and talents and in the context of their doubts and fears, their biases and preconceptions. To increase their effectiveness as an instrument, individuals hoping to develop leadership need to know themselves well and understand their impact on others.

Leadership development is never complete. As conditions and people change, learning continues. In fact, the more leadership someone does and the higher level the role from which he or she leads, the more active development needs to be. That’s where seeking feedback comes in. If leadership is about setting direction for others and motivating them to follow in that direction, leaders need to understand how they come across to others, what they do that increases others’ excitement and motivation versus detracting from it, and how they might improve. To obtain that information in work settings, they often have to seek it.

The Problem of Feedback Flow in Organizations

One thing that can be counted on in all but the rarest of organizations is that leaders do not know as well as they should how others see and are affected by them. This is true because
people don't like to share feedback—whether it's the boss dreading the annual performance review process or peers reluctant to share their perceptions of their teammates. People especially don't like to share feedback if their feedback message is negative. Studies show that people avoid giving feedback to poor performers, delay giving them feedback, and distort the feedback to make it seem less negative (Fisher, 1979; Larson, 1986; & Lee, 1993). This problem is only made worse when feedback is being given upwards, across status lines—subordinates are particularly reluctant to give feedback to their bosses. The problem is so prominent that leadership scholars have named it the “CEO disease” and argue that CEOs rarely hear good, accurate information on their own performance within the organization (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee; 2002). Jack Welch, the renowned CEO of GE, noted that layers within an organization are like sweaters: If you have enough of them, pretty soon you have no idea of the temperature. Given this reluctance to tell “higher ups” how they are affecting others, any leader who waits for feedback stunts his or her learning and growth.

The Value of Feedback Seeking

To address the interpersonal discomfort that blocks information flow across hierarchical levels, leaders need to seek feedback actively from their subordinates. Ed Koch, the mayor of New York from 1978 to 1989, was famous for engaging his constituents with the question, “How am I doing?” Andy Grove, CEO of Intel, referenced Greek mythology when he spoke of cultivating “necessary Cassandras,” people who would tell him the truth about his ideas and behavior. The tool that will help leaders learn the most from experience is within their control, simple to do, and absolutely cost free—developing a routine of seeking feedback.

Feedback seeking may be just as critical in small organizations and even start-ups. For example, a recent Inc. magazine issue profiled Jason Freedman, who is credited with developing a business idea that may revolutionize commercial real estate. In developing his idea, Jason engaged in extensive feedback seeking and learning. He notes, “If you’re worried about protecting your great business idea from potential competitors, you’re not getting the feedback you need to have a chance of making it work.” He clearly lives by the adage of “there is no such thing as failure, only feedback” (Freedman, 2012). Freedman sought feedback over a period of years while developing what is widely seen as a winning idea. What if leaders in other organizations were to do the same?

Upon hearing about some of the research on feedback and feedback seeking, one West Coast business owner decided to try it out. She began opening her senior staff meetings with a simple question: “What can I do to support the team in your efforts to achieve the goals and results we identified in our meeting last week?” She notes that the result early on was astonishment: “They were used to me directing the meeting and telling them what I expected; so to have the meeting open with me asking them—in a very sincere and interested manner—put them at ease. Several opened up with some ideas to help to move the whole
team in the direction we were seeking.” She continues to use this question as an opening to her meetings and to see positive results from it.

Research studies of practicing managers across many companies consistently say that leaders who seek feedback and seek it broadly from the various people they work with (not just from the boss) are seen as more effective by others in the organization (Ashford & Tsui, 1991). This was especially true if the leaders emphasized that they were seeking negative feedback (for example, “What can I do to improve?”). A separate study showed that people who seek feedback are rated as more creative in their performance—something of importance to most leaders today (De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Buyens, 2011). A third study showed that CEOs of small- to mid-size firms who seek feedback from their top management teams tend to have more committed top management teams, and that this commitment translated into better performance by the firm (Ashford, Sully de Luque, Wellman, De Stobbeleir, & Wollan, 2012). Clearly, seeking feedback from others in the organization pays off, both for the leader who seeks it out and for the organizational unit that he or she leads.

Why Don’t Leaders Seek More Feedback More Often?

If seeking feedback is simple, free, and so beneficial, why don’t people do it more frequently? The problem is that for most people the learning and development benefits of receiving feedback are weighed against two competing concerns. First, it hurts for leaders to hear that their behavior is not perfect, their direction is not clear, or that their attempts at inspiration fall flat. Like most of us, leaders shy away from disquieting news that might bruise their egos. The best leaders put their hearts and souls into the direction they are trying to create, and it’s hard for them to hear feedback (especially negative feedback) about their sincere efforts. That is, leaders often don’t seek feedback because they really don’t want to know. Many leaders are further hobbled by a more insidious concern—they believe it will look bad to seek feedback, that it will make them look insecure or incompetent.

The irony is that research suggests that people think more highly of leaders who seek feedback. They perceive them as more open and caring (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). Many managers have risen through the organizational ranks having rarely observed their bosses seeking feedback or having seen senior executives opening themselves up to feedback from those beneath them in the organization. As such, a leader’s willingness to be vulnerable to others’ views makes him or her seem more approachable. Any attempt to promote the seeking of feedback or to build a culture that promotes the seeking of feedback in organizations needs to take into account these two countervailing pressures.

Promoting the Seeking of Feedback Among Leaders

To promote the practice of seeking feedback, it helps to give managers some strategies for doing it. There are three different tactics for seeking feedback from others. The first is direct
inquiry, where leaders ask their peers, subordinates, and so forth, (in the style of Ed Koch) “How am I doing?” Leaders can also use a strategy of indirect inquiry by surreptitiously stimulating subordinates to provide feedback (Sully de Luque, Sommers, & Wollan, 2003). For example, leaders can engage subordinates in discussions about work in general and hope to hear comments on the work that have a direct bearing on leadership performance. Finally, leaders can monitor their subordinates and the organizational situation to infer a feedback message. Leaders who are curious about how approachable they are, for example, can answer that question by paying close attention to whether people seem comfortable approaching them. By mindfully watching others’ reactions in different situations (for example, do people seem to approach other leaders more than they do you?), leaders gain information about their own behavior (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003).

These tactics differ in terms of both how much they reveal about a leader’s desire for feedback information (direct inquiry reveals a clear desire for feedback) and in terms of the potential accuracy of the information. All strategies for gathering feedback are prone to bias; for example, using a monitoring strategy, if people think they are good at something, they tend to notice events and behaviors that reinforce that perception, thereby giving them more confidence in their self-view. Also, using a monitoring strategy for obtaining feedback does not as a rule give the leader a benefit in terms of the impression he or she makes on others (because others are unaware that the manager is attending to their behavior and using it as feedback).

While directly asking others for feedback doesn’t always yield honest answers, it usually brings more accurate appraisals than observing and interpreting a situation. So if direct inquiry communicates to others that the leader is concerned, open, and caring (and thereby encouraging subordinate teams to commit more fully to the organization’s goals) and also provides potentially more accurate data, why would a manager rely on monitoring the situation or hinting around via a process of indirect inquiry? Leaders clearly have more to gain by directly seeking feedback from others.

**Tools to Promote the Seeking of Feedback**

Ongoing feedback is inherently tied to the goals that a leader is trying to attain. For example, if a leader has identified an element of his or her behavior as problematic (for example, listening behavior), that goal serves as the focus of the feedback he or she seeks. A leader may also seek feedback on the state of the team (for example, the level of trust or accountability on the team). This, too, can be the focus of a leader’s seeking feedback. Feedback seeking tailored to a specific topic is likely to yield better information than a general “How am I doing?” (Ed Koch notwithstanding). Thus, the first step in seeking feedback is clarifying the focus of the feedback desired. What exactly are you trying to improve?

The next step is to routinize and institutionalize a feedback seeking practice related to that goal. If seeking feedback via direct inquiry, a leader might open weekly staff meetings...
asking for feedback on some attribute or another, for example about his or her personal behavior or about the functioning of the team. Alternatively, he or she might make seeking feedback the routine end to every one-on-one meeting with subordinates or peers. Executive coach Marshall Goldsmith suggests that leaders should routinely let their peers and subordinates know what they are working on in terms of their development and should ask for input and advice on how to improve.

Seeking feedback becomes both more routine and more noticeable if a leader works out a characteristic prompt that he or she can use. A cue like Ed Koch’s “How am I doing?” can work. Better yet, a leader can use a more tailored question, such as, “What advice might you have for me to help improve my effectiveness in [area of improvement]?” or “For me to be the most effective boss for you, what should I do more of, less of, and continue?” Any practice that becomes part of a leader’s routine repertoire enhances feedback seeking’s impact—both in terms of the information a leader obtains from seeking and with respect to the symbolic impact of their seeking on their subordinates’ perceptions of their caring and openness.

If a leader prefers to seek feedback using more indirect methods such as monitoring or indirect inquiry, the process also starts with being clear on the goal or focus of that seeking. Indiscriminate attention to others’ reactions to a leader are not recommended—such attention can derail a leader from his or her intentions and lead to too much focus on image and others’ views. But with a focus in mind (for example, a leader running a high-level task force might be interested in working on his or her inspirational abilities), the leader can remind himself or herself of that goal prior to task force meetings. That makes it easier to be mindful about observing others’ reactions to his or her behavior in the meeting, and how the behavior contributes to or detracts from the group’s effectiveness. Then, the leader can make changes in his or her behavior accordingly. Given the difficulty in interpreting monitored feedback cues, however, a leader might want to check any conclusions drawn from such cues with trusted others before acting on them.

Thus, the approach to seeking feedback is simple—get clear on what you want to improve and create a routine practice of seeking feedback with respect to that attribute using either direct or indirect inquiry or monitoring. See the “Feedback Seeking Checklist” in Exhibit 3.1 for reminders relevant to seeking feedback effectively.

There is a collective benefit to feedback seeking as well. In fact, leaders may also be interested in creating a culture of ongoing feedback as part of creating a learning organization. While it is valuable to send messages highlighting the benefits of seeking feedback throughout the organization, the most important step leaders can take to promote such behavior is to do it themselves and hold their top managers accountable for doing it as well. People often mimic the behaviors of those above them in the organization. When top managers seek feedback, their subordinates tend to as well. As that mimicry cascades down the organization, people become more knowledgeable about how they are viewed, where they fall short, and where they excel. As a result, they are able to make the adjustments that
Exhibit 31.1. Feedback Seeking Checklist

About What?
- Decide on the goal or focus of interest
- But be open to feedback on matters not currently on your radar

How?
- For feedback seeking via inquiry, create a routine question or prompt:
  - “How am I doing?”
  - “I’d love to hear your view of how things are going in the team”
  - “What input can you give me for how to improve things around here?”
- For feedback seeking via monitoring:
  - Pay attention to patterns and consistency in others’ behavior before reading a feedback message.
  - Beware of over-interpreting or misinterpreting another person’s behavior as a feedback message. Check the accuracy of interpretation.
- For feedback seeking via indirect inquiry:
  - Look for opportunities to stimulate others to talk about your focus of interest.
  - Ask others’ impressions about your focus of interest.
  - Recognize that this tactic yields less accurate information than direct inquiry and carries none of the symbolic benefits.

When?
- Close to events where your behaviors of interest are most on display; perhaps directly after
  - Speeches you have given
  - Retreats you have run
  - Difficult conversations you have held
- As part of your routine, such as during
  - The opening to weekly staff meeting or monthly strategy meetings
    - One-on-one meetings with key staff members
- When your seeking is most visible to others
  - So you can gain symbolic benefit (showing that you care, are open)
  - So that you serve as a role model to others.

From Whom?
- Think beyond the boss. Seek feedback from
  - Your subordinates—the people you most hope will see leadership qualities in you
  - Your peers working with you on projects. They might contribute to your formal performance review and any one of them might become your boss.
allow better coordination within the organization and higher performance in the organization as a whole.

For leaders who are able to face their ego and image concerns and risk receiving feedback, the payoff both in terms of image (as caring and open) and follower commitment, as well as in terms of personal learning and development are substantial. If the goal is to develop leaders in organizations (and to improve organizations in the process), one important aspect of achieving that goal is helping leaders to more frequently seek feedback proactively. It is a managerial practice that is simple, free, and beneficial. Leaders just have to keep their egos in check and develop a habit of proactively seeking feedback to enjoy its benefits.

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