Giving and receiving feedback - role play exercise

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Introduction

Drawing inspiration from one element of a management development programme at a large, international airline the author had helped co-design, this role play exercise was utilised in its current form as part of an experiential, two-week long MBA professional development skills induction programme. It was designed to help accelerate the formation of strong ties amongst a group of international, post-experience business school Master's students. However, it was later also successfully deployed as an ice breaker/ team building exercise for the School of Management's group of Undergraduate Student Ambassadors, who were employed part-time during applicant visit and open days to represent the department. It might also be deployed as part of a personal tutoring or career development programme, or even within a vocationally oriented management and leadership module.

The session is designed to encourage extensive student participation, and much of the 60 to 90 minutes required to successfully run this intervention should see students working in pairs or discussing their reflections in small groups. This exercise requires no prior preparation from students, and the concise role play scenarios are simultaneously both succinct and sufficiently rich, the material can be quickly absorbed and embodied in a relatively short period of time.

In an increasingly competitive environment where students often identify feedback as the lowest rated satisfaction measure (see: Ferguson, 2011; Canning, 2018), this instructional guide provides university tutors with

an additional, rich tool that has been shown, over many iterations, to help develop important soft skills (Ritter, Small, Mortimer & Doll, 2018).

Learning Outcomes

After this intervention, students should be able to:

- Confidently make an active, oral contribution during class
- Reflect on their own (role play) behaviour with a peer
- Operationalise the fundamentals of giving and receiving effective feedback
- Through immersive experiential learning and reflection, understand the importance of gaining trust and facilitating active listening
- Appreciate the altruistic nature of feedback, the importance of using specific examples and to be confident in asking for feedback more often

Lesson plan

[2 mins]: Overview of session

[5 mins]: To plenary:

"What do we think about feedback?" [wait for students to break the ice here, do not rush onto the subsequent questions]
"Do you like receiving feedback?"
"What about giving feedback – is it easy or hard?"
"How do you feel when you've had disappointing feedback?"
"Can you tell me about a time when you acted on difficult feedback and it really made a difference ?"

Give the group feedback on their performance, role modelling the feedback sandwich model – sugar coated buns, developmental meat – with specific examples from the plenary discussion.

[5-10 mins]: Introduction to giving and receiving feedback, three key points; (1) act of kindness, (2) continuous improvement, (3) impression given of not asking for feedback. Discuss the concept of fight or flight – in particular response to unsolicited negative feedback. Emphasise importance of source credibility and the need to regularly solicit feedback. Introduce the Johari Window (South, 2007) and highlight the blind spot danger area. Explain the anatomy of the feedback sandwich. [Add a bit of fun by badly drawing a burger on a white board, with sesame seed embellishment dots.] Emphasise that University should be a safe place for learning – by making mistakes. Reprise key points.

[7-10 mins]: Encourage students to form pairs (odd one out can form a three, or the instructor can role play).

> "On the instructor's signal, you will be invited to 'perform' the first role play, role play ONE. Each brief has two roles for you, one where you are the line manager, the other you are the subordinate."
> "There are five minutes reading time to prepare first."

Distribute/allocate role plays –

> "Together each pair should have one brief A and one brief B (two roles on separate A4 sheets). Read **only** the brief assigned to you."

> "Role play ONE has Sal as the line manager to Sam (top of the page). Confirm in your pair that you know who is Sal and who is Sam."

> "Take 5 minutes to read and prepare for role play ONE only at this stage."

[Encourage discussion with other students in the same role if there is ample time

> "Sal should make notes before commencing."

[5-7 mins]: Launch the role playing.
> "Preparation time is over."
> "Please now imagine that you are in a comfortable and reasonably intimate space, where no one can overhear you."
> "You have about 5 to 7 minutes to perform the role play ONE."
> "Once you have finished, silently reflect on the conversation you have just had."

[5 mins]: Encourage reflection
> "In your pairs, please reflect on your conversation. How did you feel at key points?"

[5-10 mins]: Plenary discussion:
> "What did you learn?"
> "What was difficult?"
> "What did you enjoy?"
> "How realistic did this situation feel?"

[5 mins]: Reverse roles in role play two.
> "Please now prepare for role play TWO."
> "Please identify who is playing Wei/Hui the shift leader and who has the role of bar worker Jo/e"

[Names chosen are deliberately diverse and inclusive, including the use of the non-binary 'they' personal pronoun. Wei is female with a rising intonation, whilst male Hui has a falling intonation – non-native Chinese speakers may not hear the tonal difference. The instructor may choose to change the names to better reflect the student groups' diversity.]

[5-7 mins]: Launch role play two.
> "Preparation time is now over."
> "Please now imagine that you are in a comfortable and reasonably intimate space, where no one can overhear you."
> "You have about 5 to 7 minutes to perform the role play TWO."
> "Once you have finished, silently reflect on the conversation you have just had."

[5 mins]: Encourage reflection.
> "In your pairs, please reflect on your conversation. How did you feel at key points?"

[5-15 mins]: Plenary discussion:
> "What did you learn ?"
> "What was difficult ?"
> "What did you enjoy ?"
> "How realistic did this situation feel ?"
> "How was the second role play compared with the first ?"
> "Why was it different ?"

[3 mins]: Emphasise the learning outcomes for the intervention. Give the group feedback on their performance role modelling the feedback sandwich model – sugar coated buns, meat – with specific examples from the discussion.

Teaching Reflections

Although the burger bun or sandwich feedback model (Docheff, 1990) is widely used in industry (e.g. Glover, 2000), it does not always receive a positive reception in academia (see illustrative examples: Henley & DiGennaro Reed, 2015; Von Bergen, Bressler & Campbell, 2014; Boud & Molloy, 2012). The simplistic mechanic can become a cliché, and there is some danger that managers and/or subordinates may not take the feedback exercise seriously.

If the line manager is merely seen to be running the feedback process for the sake of it and not really committed to offer genuine developmental support to their subordinates (e.g. by rushing the process, coming across as disinterested, moving the meeting to accommodate other priorities, being badly prepared or disorganised, not having evidence of specific situations to hand, not asking for and listening to feedback themselves) then the process is likely to lack integrity and effectiveness.

It is important that the feedback encounter does not feel like a cookie cutter exercise, and with experience over time managers and supervisors will develop their own style for running these conversations that will likely be tuned into the subordinate's preferences and experience.

Additional Teaching Resources

Harley, S. (2014, June 19). *Giving feedback.* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/28N2p3smEsw

Harley, S. (2013, October 22). *How to tell someone they smell.* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/NpLLxcHCBP0

Mayer, J. (2013, April 19). *Run, hide, or say thank you: When faced with feedback, what do you do?* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/b0bS4xJiEU8

South, B. (2007). Combining mandala and the Johari Window: An exercise in self-awareness. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing, 2*(1), 8-11.

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Boud, D., & Molloy, E. (2012). What is the Problem with Feedback? In D. Boud & E. Malloy, *Feedback in higher and professional education* (pp. 11-20). New York, NY: Routledge.

Canning, J. (2013, July). Feedback: A short academic literature review [Blog post]. *SPEAQ.* Retrieved from http://blog.soton.ac.uk/gmoof/files/2013/07/Feedback-literature-review2.pdf

Clynes, M. P., & Raftery, S. E. (2008). Feedback: An essential element of student learning in clinical practice. *Nurse Education in Practice, 8*(6), 405-411.

Docheff, D. M. (1990). The feedback sandwich. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 61*(9), 17-18.

Ferguson, P. (2011). Student perceptions of quality feedback in teacher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 36*(1), 51-62.

Glover, P. A. (2000). Feedback. I listened, reflected and utilized: Third year nursing students' perceptions and use of feedback in the clinical setting. *International Journal of Nursing Practice, 6*(5), 247-252.

Henley, A. J., & DiGennaro Reed, F. D. (2015). Should you order the feedback sandwich? Efficacy of feedback sequence and timing. *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management, 35*(3-4), 321-335.

Luft, J., & Ingham, H. (1961). The Johari window. *Human Relations Training News, 5*(1), 6-7.

Ritter, B. A., Small, E. E., Mortimer, J. W., & Doll, J. L. (2018). Designing management curriculum for workplace readiness: Developing students' soft skills. *Journal of Management Education, 42*(1), 80-103.

Von Bergen, C. W., Bressler, M. S., & Campbell, K. (2014). The sandwich feedback method: Not very tasty. *Journal of Behavioral Studies in Business, 7*, 1-13.

Appendix 1

Role play scenario <Brief A>

Playing Sal, Sam's line manager: Role Play ONE - Giving feedback

You to play the role of Sal, customer service supervisor responsible for managing the performance of a team of frontline staff who primarily sell mobile telephones. The team also handles general service enquires and complaints at a High Street retail outlet, over the telephone and online. The team of eight comprise four full time staff and four part-timers, who are often students working weekend shifts.

Sam has been employed as part of the team for six months and has settled well, demonstrating a positive approach to working with other members of the team. Sam has a good habit of writing down any follow-on calls required the next day, although sometimes this annoys other staff members as they are often delayed closing the shop at the end of the day. Much effort from Sam has gone into communicating to shop visitors various functional attributes of the display products, but their experience is now beginning to show, allowing browsers to look, yet be open to take 'intend to buy' potential customers to the next stage in the sales funnel process.

Although relatively young and quite inexperienced initially in a frontline sales role, previous experience in a fast food restaurant results in a positive impression being created with clients. You recently overheard a customer leaving the shop as you returned from lunch saying (about Sam) "That sales assistant was very helpful. I really didn't know what to do, they took a long time helping me get the right phone for me." On occasions, time keeping for the start of work has been an issue, particularly for early shifts. The one thing that you have been waiting for the right moment to discuss with Sam is their personal hygiene (they smell). The sales performance statistics for the last quarter have just been published and Sam ranked 4th in the team, despite being a part-time worker.

Playing bar worker Jo/e: Role Play TWO - Receiving feedback

You are to play the role of Jo/e, who is being performance managed using the feedback process with boss Wei/Hui, who is your regular shift leader. You have taken this bar work because your family can no longer support your studies. You are quite shy and would never choose to work in such an exposed customer role. You struggle to know how to handle personal comments from customers, particularly later in the evenings. You are told by others that you are quite a fun personality, but you do not like to step forwards, preferring that others take a leadership role if there are difficult situations. Most of your co-workers are fellow students, so you enjoy the banter that goes around.

DO NOT REVEAL THE FOLLOWING UNLESS YOU FEEL GENUINELY COMFORTABLE/TRUST THE PERSON GIVING FEEDBACK. A family member has alcohol issues. You struggle to cope with people who have intoxicated themselves.

Role play scenario <Brief B>

Playing Sam: Role Play ONE - Receiving feedback

You are Sam. You work part time on the weekends and holidays in a mobile phone retail outlet. You are young and quite new to sales and working in a retail sales environment. You knew relatively little about telephones before commencing work. You have previous customer service experience working in a fast food restaurant from a young age. You are quite shy and have not previously had a performance review with your shop manager, Sal, before. You enjoy working as part of the team, although a few of your innovations have not been more widely adopted by colleagues.

DO NOT REVEAL THE FOLLOWING UNLESS YOU FEEL GENUINELY COMFORTABLE/TRUST THE PERSON GIVING FEEDBACK

You are having problems at home and have had to crash overnight with friends unexpectedly quite a lot.

You are Wei/Hui, regular shift leader running a popular bar. Your boss works a 60-hour week, but has a family and often leaves you in charge to close up and look after the weekends. You are around the same age as the other staff and are paid the same hourly rate. You organise the work roster and get paid more than others because you work more hours regularly. You have just attended a management training refresher programme and you are keen to ensure that all the important service elements are delivered consistently. You are a bit of a character, with strong opinions, a loud voice and a very direct manner with everyone.

To your mind, Jo/e causes few breakages of stock and glasses, a key indicator you use to establish the quality of a worker. Once in a while a customer will offer to buy Jo/e a drink, a sign of a developing rapport with regulars. Whilst not always the first staff member to arrive when a difficult customer situation arises, Jo/e is effective at identifying short stock items in good time and proactively taking steps to ensure that during the busy periods, re-stocking is not required. They have learnt the product range and pricing quickly and appear to offer consistently high levels of efficient bar service, although could offer stronger eye contact when dealing with customers. Although not a huge issue, this is a hot button item for you. A little shy in the beginning, Jo/e has integrated well into the team and offers to stay late to help cash up and complete the cleaning regularly, although custom and practice does not usually see this as a paid activity.

Appendix 2: Burger Bun Feedback briefing/ presentation notes

Giving and Receiving Feed*back*

https://pixabay.com/images/id-1239198/

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Why use Feedback?
An act of kindness, not punishment

- It is imperative that you engage in the feedback process in an emotionally balanced or positive frame of mind.

- Never make the mistake of giving your feedback in the heat of the moment, it is unlikely to be balanced or constructive. You may say something(s) you later regret.

Why use Feedback? [2]
Continuous improvement

- Used effectively, feedback offers a positive reinforcement of good behaviours:
  – Show personal awareness
  – Ask for feedback
  – Be seen to act on feedback
  – Go to (1) again

Why use Feedback? [3]
Not asking for feedback means?

- You do not care about what others think?
- Believe yourself superior to others?
- You are perfect in every way?

Build Self-Awareness

Often at interviews you will be asked a (disguised) question about personal awareness:

"What are your strengths & weaknesses?"

"Can you tell me about a time when….?"

"What will you achieve in your first 100 days?"

"What are your development needs?"

"Describe your management style?"

University: safe place for learning

• Students are given some tolerance as they use their degree experience as a chance to experiment and mature; a process that often involves making mistakes and learning from them https://pixabay.com/images/id-1239198/em, as well as building confidence from successes.

University is a GREAT, safe place to trial giving and receiving feedback

Fight-or-Flight?

• It is likely that you are familiar with the fight or flight instincts, that invoke powerful responses to danger.

• To be effective (or merely vaguely useful) the feedback process needs to avoid both of these primal reactions. In both situation's it is likely that any messages put across will be firmly **REJECTED**.

Rejecting the Source of feedback

• Someone you do not like, do not have respect for, does not like you, wants only bad things to happen to you, cannot realistically offer helpful feedback.

Effective Feedback components:

- **TRUST** the persons integrity and the process itself
- **BE SAFE** and **UNTHREATENING** away from the crowd
- **CONFIDENTIAL** conversations stay behind closed doors
- **FACTUAL** use specific examples (notes)
- **OBJECTIVE** avoid heightened emotional situations

The feedback sandwich

- Remember to start the process with open ears, positive body language and a warm he♥rt. You are helping someone develop, not off-loading your own pent up emotional frustration.
- Choose a suitable location, that is private and where you will not be disturbed. Turn off your phone and tablet. Avoid the bosses office.

The Feedback Sandwich

BUN

MEAT

BUN

BUN: Break the ice, build rapport

- Use three positive, specific examples
- Avoid generalizing, it lacks credibility
- Honestly reaffirm positives
- Use strong examples (from notes)

MEAT: key for change

- Difficult topics, use an inverted opening "How are you finding….??"
- Be factual, avoid opinion or feelings
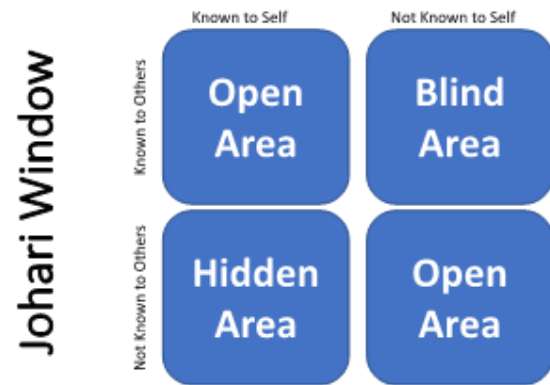- Be succinct. Give examples.

BUN: Close on a positive

•Be real. Be authentic. More examples.
•Invite comments genuinely (don't yawn !)

•End on a **HIGH**.

Watch your blind spot

•Learning to drive we all learnt about that zone where even cleverly placed mirrors cannot cover. We are taught to turn our heads to avoid missing something in the 'blind spot'.

The Johari window is a practical 2x2 framework that helps us remember that we really do not know everything, and reinforces the need for feedback.

Johari Window

	Known to Self	Not Known to Self
Known to Others	Open Area	Blind Area
Not Known to Others	Hidden Area	Open Area

(South, 2007)

Blind spot: Remember to turn your head

Remember

•It is difficult to give constructive feedback effectively
•Most people value your help
•No one wants to mess up because of a 'blind spot'
•Experience makes the process much easier
•Practice makes perfect

(...continuous evolution towards nirvana)

•Try to walk out smiling