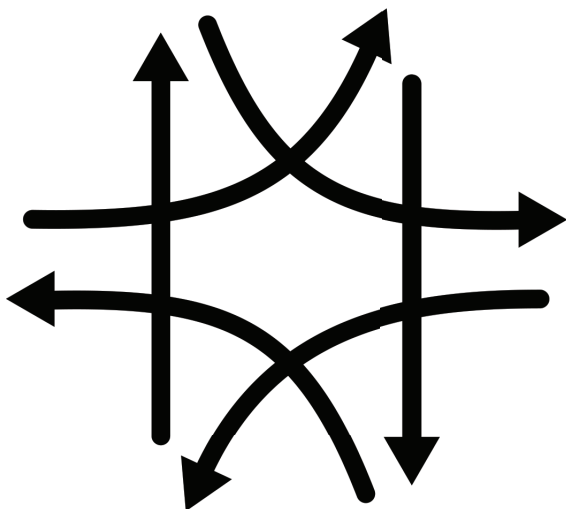


NO MORE FEEDBACK



[CULTIVATE
CONSCIOUSNESS
AT WORK]

CAROL SANFORD

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TO THE MILLENNIALS—

We count on each new generation to help us steer toward a better world.

Thank you for stepping up to the plate so ferociously.

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This is the first book I have written without my great publisher, Nicholas Brealey. Thank goodness, I always have Kit Brewer, my dedicated and diligent personal editor, who has gone above and beyond on this work. Scott Yeager provided invaluable guidance early on about how to structure the book. A handful of my Change Agent Community members also cared enough to dig in and tell me what worked for them and what did not. Thanks in particular to Jennifer Atlee, Beatrice Ungard, and Mary Emeny. Additional thanks to Gabriel Fehrenbach and Lisa Gill from LinkedIn connections who offered straightforward and useful advice.

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FOREWORD

I think the intentions of feedback proponents are pure—compared with the top-down, hardline mandates of the past, having a space for dialogue about performance is a huge step up. Performance reviews, particularly ones using “360-degree feedback” from people at different levels of a company, were meant to be collaborative. But they also came out of the machine reductionist paradigm, in which the world is seen as one giant assembly line, and all you have to do is input x to produce y . Of course, the world is not so simple, and humans are not machines.

In my over twenty-five years of experience in business, I’ve seen how detrimental constant feedback can be, how it chips away at our powers of discernment and the self-confidence we need to investigate and express whatever it is that makes us unique. I’ve also seen what real conversations about the ways in which we approach problems or interact with our team can do, as long as they are genuine, nurture our unique essence, and empower us to build our capacity, to reach further than we thought possible. In these kinds of conversations, you can’t give precise advice for how to color inside the lines, or even offer support for not thinking outside the box—you must abandon the lines and the box in search of something completely unknown.

Treating humans like complex beings living in a complex universe makes life more complicated. It requires taking the living systems perspective, in which we view everything as alive, evolving, and connected to everything else. Though challenging, seeing the world in this way is essential at this moment, when the challenges we face are both dire and brand new. Now we

have to expand our ways of thinking, to look at an immediate challenge and attempt to see it within its greater context, to consider the ripple effects of each of our actions. By pushing against the edge again and again and turning possibilities into realities, we are taking steps now to live what we have the power to imagine. For this profound insight, I have Carol Sanford to thank.

Studying with Carol Sanford has blown my world wide open. She is a contrarian in the best sense of the word, someone totally unswayed by popular opinion or standard practice. As part of her regenerative business community, I am continually surprised to find that what I've always taken for granted as foundational isn't actually set in stone, that there is so much more complexity and potential in the world than I previously thought. This book isn't for those looking for a premade path; it's for anyone who is willing to take the more treacherous path of self-reflection and continual awakening, to find their own way by going within and seeing the world anew.

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PREFACE

WHY CRITIQUE THE MOST POPULAR PRACTICE EVER? TOXICITY!

I will admit from the start that this is a contrarian view of a subject that *I love to hate*: Feedback. People are often shocked that I would critique something that they think *must* be good for them and certainly good for others, no matter how much they dislike participating in it. After all, without feedback, how would we know how others see us? How would we get better at what we do?

My answer to this is that there is a much more effective way for people to accurately assess their work, improve their performance, and raise the level of their contributions—with none of the downsides or negative side effects of feedback.

If you are a manager or someone who supports managers, you are probably always seeking ways to help people succeed and to improve your organization. You might also want to make it possible for employees to appreciate their jobs and find work more meaningful. You may believe feedback is a great tool for getting this done. This book is written to show how it actually comes close to doing the exact opposite. I also hope to demonstrate that

there is a far more effective way to get the results you are looking for and it is easier than you might think.

To accomplish this, I will relate a bit of feedback's history—how it was developed and sold to us as a *best practice*, how we were fooled into believing the pitch (it happened to all of us), and why we continue to miss the forest for the trees. More importantly, I will also show you why you cannot fix the feedback process by tweaking it, training people to do a better job of it, or hiring the right people for it in the first place. The problem is innate to the process itself.

While I want to make this lesson available to more people, I do not want you to adopt my thoughts or my truth. Instead, I offer ways for you to learn to deeply examine your own and others' ideas, to develop discernment, to think critically, and to take on change as a necessary and exhilarating aspect of human life. In order to clearly see the toxic nature of feedback, you will have to rigorously question my argument, reflect honestly on your own experience, and trust yourself to discern the truth. Our minds play tricks on us, and we will examine that phenomenon, too, because mind games lead us to believe in feedback. They will make it hard to let go, especially given our deep investment.

Be prepared to rethink your certainties and maybe even to forgive yourself along the way—and to forgive those who put you through craziness and exposed you to toxicity. I know this because it is what I had to do when I learned the truth about feedback. I had to forgive myself and forgive those who imposed it on me.

The good news is that my tested and proven alternative to feedback enables people to develop the clear thinking required to see themselves and their effects on others. This is a set of practices that empowers people to correct course, leap ahead, and perform better. An organization can function at its best without the corraling effect of feedback, and for that matter, without feedback's toxic companion practices. Those include performance reviews,

discipline sessions, and plans for growth, to name just a few. Making people responsible for managing themselves does not require turning the asylum over to the inmates.

Here is a quick outline of the contents of this book.

- My own feedback story and how its effects on my well-being woke me up to feedback's toxicity, along with the research that put me back on the developmental path
- The higher aims of alternative practices that enable the development of three core capacities as a way to actually realize human potential
- A history of feedback that helps explain why organizations adopted it and how it became part of our educational institutions and businesses, and even most of our families as a tool for parenting
- A short lesson in psychology, discussing the deceptive ways in which the brain works to hide the harmful effects of feedback (and other toxic practices)
- A rundown of ways that feedback undermines the three core human capacities and causes many of the very problems it seeks to solve, including apathy, lack of initiative, and incomplete responsibility or self-centeredness
- Premises and principles to start you on the path to transformative human and business development, coupled with a list of resources to take you all the way if you choose
- Along the way, real-life examples of my work with companies that demonstrates both the negative effects of feedback and the potential of an alternative developmental path to produce growth and transformation in any organization

INTRODUCTION

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH FEEDBACK

My story is an overview of everything offered in this book. I wonder if it will feel familiar to you. Take notes! And be sure to let me know.

When I was almost 30 years old, I put myself on the track toward becoming a full university professor. I was working on a doctoral degree and teaching at San Jose State University in a combined program for graduate students in business, urban planning, and information technology (then called cybernetic systems). Each student earned a master's degree in one of these disciplines but took courses in all three.

Teaching and conducting research in the program exhilarated me, partly because I was the youngest member of an exceptionally experienced team of full professors. I did not mind being the kid on the block who often did the grunt work. Sadly, the program ended after only three years because a new dean of the business school chose to redistribute resources to other “worthier” endeavors. I had a dual master's in business and urban planning and was offered a teaching position in the Urban Planning Department. It was there that I experienced firsthand the devastating impact of what I had been teaching—ideas that were, in fact, toxic practices.

The Dean of Urban Planning fancied himself a great leader and coach of up-and-coming faculty. He was sincerely dedicated to this work, and he had an undergraduate minor in psychology that reinforced his confidence. He was introduced to feedback many years before, when he was in the military, and brought it with him to his new vocation.

After one month in my assistant professor role, I found myself sitting across from him wanting very much to be seen in a good light by my new superior. He held my future teaching career in his hands. He announced that I was going to be introduced to what he called a “cybernetic feedback method,” one that we would recognize today as the forerunner of 360-degree feedback, which is conducted annually in many companies.

The dean gave me a form and explained that I was to evaluate myself against nine competencies defined by the faculty leadership team. I had seen these competencies before but was still a bit confused about how they applied to me and where I fit in their system. I did not expect that I also would be evaluated by my *peers*—a handful of faculty plus the chairman of the department. The dean was very patient with me. He answered all my questions and then set me off to come back the following week with my own evaluation. I was to receive the reflections of my peers within a month. The chairman would review these, add his own thoughts, and meet with me again within a couple of months.

I was surprised at the level of anxiety this process brought on in me—very surprised. At the time, I had been meditating for seven years, a practice that invites and supports looking at one’s mind and its machinations. I was also part of a group that journaled together, using a set of practices that asked us to set personal aims (inner ones) based on learning and accomplishment (personal growth) objectives. We met monthly and used spiritual teachings as references. We did a lot of reflecting but never provided feedback to one another.

I did my feedback homework as required but I was pretty dissatisfied with the core competencies list as a reference against which to evaluate myself. Some competencies felt shallow or vague; for example, was I “able to listen and take criticism?” I wondered if that meant whether I was able to listen to all criticism and take all of it as useful. Some competencies seemed to be the opposite of what was most important to me as a faculty member. Analytical thinking was stressed but there was nothing on the systems thinking that was central to my work.

The competencies seemed academic to everyone I asked for help, and I got only very general ideas about how to apply them. Even the definitions and examples on the page of instructions were abstract. I attended a one-hour training where I watched a video on the process but that was no help either.

Even worse, a few of the competencies felt dead wrong. For example, one of the questions asked if I was “able to persuade and influence others.” What had happened to co-create and collaborate? Neither was on the list, although there was a reference to teamwork. For the most part these questions, too, felt abstract and generic making it difficult to assess myself in a meaningful way. Equally important to me, not one of the nine competencies addressed how graduates from the department would successfully enter the real world, given our contributions to their learning.

Truly, everything that I felt was really great and challenging about teaching did not appear on this list—namely, the ability to make sense out of very complicated ideas and engage others in understanding them together. Developing this competency was the very reason I had asked to be part of the cross-discipline teaching team in the program that had been shut down. Here, in my new position, it did not seem to count at all.

The people evaluating me were a mix of those I had worked with, even if not closely, and others who knew me from a bit of distance. I taught department courses on social and psychological aspects of communities while working on my doctorate in cognitive and organization psychology. My dissertation

research examined how researchers almost always (consciously or unconsciously) influenced their research hypothesis, methodology, execution, and findings.

The method for my own research was to ask researchers to assess themselves using a journaling process and then to engage them in an interview about their findings. (I followed up with half of them a few years later and found that what they had learned about themselves working with me on this project continued to guide their self-directed development and professional work.) I started this research when I was teaching in the cross-degree program and carried it forward in the Urban Planning Department. Within the context of my meditation practice, journaling group, and research, I also journaled my experiences, interior and exterior, working on the feedback form required by my new position.

My peers offered many ideas intended to help me grow. For example, their comments included, “Spend more time writing out your lectures so that less is left to chance and your presentations are not incomplete. This should enable you or others to replicate your lectures for classes in the future.” Most of these faculty knew or had heard that I favored working from outlines of key points. I used the life situations of my students, in real time in the class, to teach principles based on their actual organization and community experience. This was intended to draw out what they had learned and rigorously test my own ideas. It worked so well and generated such enthusiastic learning that I and my students often ended up staying after class for more conversation and exploration.

To my peers, this did not seem to match the competency to “be well prepared and able to benchmark thoroughness and repeatability.” The department chairman gave these remarks to me and added another suggestion: I was to learn to “simplify core concepts and require less effort from students to extract them, in order to prevent confusion and lack of clarity concerning what the test will include.” But, unbeknownst to my chairman, I did not test my

students. I assigned them to develop projects that would create real change and then to write papers developing a theory of change based on their concrete experiences carrying out their projects. This was a graduate program. Was I really supposed to be spoon-feeding information to my students?

The outcome of my feedback process was two objectives, which were written into my development plan: 1) simplify my course and make what I wanted students to learn more explicit from the beginning, and 2) write out my lectures to make them more thorough and repeatable in order to ensure transference. I was given training assignments and quarterly benchmarks to follow up on. I mark this as the first day of a two-year period during which I mostly stopped listening to myself and gave up ways of working based on what I knew, deep down, to be far better. Looking back, this seems almost inevitable. It was a pattern carried forward from my childhood. Feedback had hit me in one of my most vulnerable places.

And this pattern was ingrained not just in me. I recognized from my own research that it commonly developed from the way most children are raised in Western society. I also had seen it in an experimental research project I conducted that demonstrated how easy it is to get children to abandon their own ideas and focus on what adults or powerful others want them to do and think. I knew this was behavior built into our brains. We all need to belong; the fear of being ostracized is part of our survival instinct. This instinct is so powerful that it causes children to lie to themselves and others about what they are doing. Instead, they mirror what others tell them they ought to be doing—or, if they do not lie, they experience painful doubt about themselves and their own ways of thinking.

Aspiring to become a full professor in a cross-discipline program meant I needed to learn to function in an environment where others were part of a process that taught us how to see ourselves. At the one-year feedback follow-up, I was considered to have improved on both fronts. I had worked hard in this new direction and taken my training seriously. But I was still

keeping my journal, consistently recording feelings that what I was asked to do was not serving my students well. I taught differently, and I was perceived to be better at it. But my newly developed capabilities and the method of working I was developing did not fit me or my teaching philosophy at all. They adhered to supposedly core competencies, and yet I felt that the objectives in my development plan came from the ideas of other people about what good teaching at the graduate level looked like. In their earnest attempts to help me grow, my peers judged me against their own shortfalls and well-intentioned preconceptions.

I left San Jose State one year later, feeling that I could no longer enjoy a work track that required me to sacrifice the real value I had to offer students and what they most needed from their graduate programs. I wanted to work with the Socratic method on very complex subjects. I wanted to engage with people in organization and community leadership roles on work that would enable them to discern paths forward through complex and extraordinarily challenging situations. I soon came to understand my disappointing experience in the Urban Planning Department as a conflict of epistemology, defined as how people learn and the acceptable means of helping them come to know something.

It took me about five years to find a different, truer path to what I wanted to accomplish. The alternatives that I created to replace toxic practices such as 360-degree feedback are the result of that search. I began to develop them when I finally learned to trust myself, to know and work from *my* essence, and to listen to *my* ideas. This life change enabled me to find teachers and colleagues who thought that what I did was amazing and wanted to learn how to do it for themselves—not merely to imitate what I did. These people were passionately committed to finding and following their own paths to innovation, based on discovery of their own essences and ideas.

The biggest surprise of this transition was that I discovered how many people had stopped listening to themselves, and were keeping their heads down and

working within the system. I was also surprised by the strength of their hope and desire to find ways to fulfill their potential in the professional worlds they had worked so hard to enter. Some had left their institutions in search of a different path, as I had. Some had stayed and made their way as best they could. Often they had given up. They had come to believe the toxic stories told to them in feedback sessions. If they had managed to stop dwelling on them, they were nevertheless mostly silenced, and their original dreams were obscured.

I felt deeply that I wanted to help those who had not found ways to be fully themselves in professional environments. By the time I was 35, I had focused on businesses, particularly corporations, as the places I thought I might be able to succeed in carrying out this personal mission. These were the organizations where most people made their livings, and where large groups of people had to adhere to guidelines and programs over which they had little or no control. I soon found a way to create evolutionary changes in business practice, based on the ideas I had about how organizations could work for the benefit of all—customers, employees and cocreators, communities, ecosystems, and stockholders—in other words, the people I now refer to collectively as “stakeholders.”

The door to this way forward was opened through a set of conversations with managers who knew that something was wrong and wanted help. A wide gap existed between what they thought were the sources of their challenges and what I knew they had not yet learned to see. To me, this was my great opportunity to contribute to the world, and it was where I began the next stage of my professional development. I grabbed it and I am still running with it.