Experience-Driven Leader Development

Models, Tools, Best Practices, and Advice for On-the-Job Development

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Micro-Feedback: A Tool for Real-Time Learning

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AT PAYLESS, PERFORMANCE reviews are held annually, with perhaps a midyear review, and, of course, more frequent coaching and feedback discussions between associates and their managers are encouraged, but engagement surveys and focus groups indicate that these conversations often don't take place. It would be gratifying to be able to claim a culture of feedback, where everybody seeks, gives, and receives feedback on a regular basis, regardless of level or relationship; but the organization is not there yet. Year after year, some of the lowest scores on the engagement survey have been related to coaching and development conversations. The evidence is clear that feedback is a critical element in on-the-job development. Feedback encourages reflection on the experience that a person is having, and it is this process of thinking through the experience and the choices being made as a part of that experience that results in the learning and development. Without feedback, a person can go through a new experience and yet not learn or develop in any significant way. As important as feedback is to development, it is an area of opportunity for many individuals and companies.

Recently, Payless piloted a new approach to tackle this ubiquitous problem. Working with a small start-up company, the organization implemented a type of micro-feedback (see Table 33.1 for benefits and challenges of micro-feedback). There are many similar companies

Table 33.1.   Benefits and Challenges of Micro-Feedback

Benefits	Challenges
• Real-time feedback • Team members as raters are usually close to the associate and experience • Flexibility in questions and format • Lots of data without overtaxing associates • Encourages face-to-face follow-up • Spurs development conversations with managers • Easy interface allows for viewing results weekly, monthly, quarterly—see changes over time	• Potential to become bored or annoyed with frequent surveys • (Specific to tool chosen) Feedback limited to team; some associates would have benefited from broader reach • Questions intended to be set up on a role basis; setting up on individual basis means larger workload for administrator • (Specific to tool chosen) All team members must be included

Exhibit 33.1. Sample Questions

1. With regard to the frequency of your updates to team members on project status:

    a. Keep up the good work!

    b. Do much more

    c. Do more

    d. Do less

    e. Do much less

2. Considering the balance between positive feedback and constructive criticism:

    a. Keep up the good work!

    b. Provide more positive comments

    c. Provide more constructive criticism

    d. Provide more of both positive comments and constructive criticism

    e. Other (please explain)

and products available, as well as the option to design and administer it yourself. The version used at Payless was similar to a 360-degree instrument in format but more flexible in several ways than the organization's traditional 360 approach—which is done on a three-year rotation with content drawn from its leadership competencies. The reports from these 360s do provide valuable feedback, but it is often somewhat general since the competencies apply across the organization and, because they are done infrequently, the feedback tends to reflect overall impressions rather than specific instances.

The micro-feedback approach that was piloted provided feedback on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis, with reports available for these timeframes as well as quarterly and annually

(see the sample questions in Exhibit 33.1). The content was based on an associate's role, and there were no restrictions on the number of roles you could set up, which means you could potentially have set up a different survey for each associate (although there are, of course, workload issues with that). This allowed associates to receive frequent feedback about behaviors specific to their roles from the people who worked most closely with them. The survey still maintained anonymity, as feedback scores were rolled up and presented in aggregate. Each question included an option to expand on the rating given with a comment. Comments were provided in the report verbatim, so respondents who wanted to identify themselves or describe a specific incident could do so in that section.

This process is particularly useful for enhancing experience-based development because of the flexibility with the questions themselves. Depending on the tool that was used, each person could write the questions he or she wanted feedback on, or a list of questions could be pre-populated into the tool and people could choose from the list. An associate who was in a leadership role for the first time, for example, could identify five or six key behaviors important for success in the role and craft questions about them. A leader who was going through a turnaround could work with a mentor or his or her manager to identify the critical actions that would enable success and set these up in the tool as questions. Also, since it was likely that the people on the associate's team were either going through a similar experience or were aware of the experience that the individual was going through at any given time, their feedback could be in real time and specific.

Surveys can be sent out at whatever interval the organization decides fits with its culture. Both daily and weekly were tried, and the feedback received from our testers indicated that weekly was preferable. The surveys were not typically very long, but people tended to feel annoyed if they had a new one in their inboxes every day. The surveys themselves rotated questions so you might have been asked one question about your manager, one each about two different peers, and one about a direct report. The actual number of questions on the survey that you received depended on the number of people on the team and the number of total items in the pool. The tool used at Payless ensured that at least two people were asked each question for each associate each week. Respondents did not have to log in to complete the survey; a link was provided and when they clicked on the link people were taken right into the survey, which saved time and meant people didn't have to remember passwords. Completion time was about five to ten minutes, depending on how much time a respondent chose to spend on open-ended comments.

Associates could access their rolling reports at any time. Data became available once the minimum number of responses had been reached, and associates could monitor changes across weeks and then months as data added up. Line graphs showing trends were included so it was easy to see changes over time. Associates being rated felt that having results on a weekly basis allowed them time to absorb the results, make any changes needed, and see whether the changes had an effect. The open-ended comments were included in each version of the report, dated by week. As with most feedback tools, people really liked these

open-ended comments because they typically provided the most specific feedback. In this case, that feedback was also usually timely and relevant, and so easier to act upon.

The reports were useful conversation starters for staff meetings with a manager, or could be shown to team members to solicit additional information. Rather than a direct, "How do you think I'm doing in this area?" it is somehow easier for people to respond to, "My report suggests that most of my team feels I could work on this. Even if you weren't one who responded that way, can you think of some ways that I could improve here?"

One question some people in our organization asked was whether this tool would actually *dis*courage coaching and feedback conversations since people could just quickly click a numeric response to a question rather than taking the time to go talk with the person face to face. While this is a legitimate concern, we found that the process actually worked the other way. First of all, spontaneous face-to-face conversations were not taking place prior to implementing the tool so there wasn't much to lose! For associates receiving feedback, the reports gave them an initial "peek" at how people on their teams thought they were doing, and they used these reports in weekly staff meetings with their managers to discuss both areas that appeared as strengths as well as those with room for improvement.

They and their managers would plan how to improve in the areas with lower scores, which often included face-to-face conversations with other team members to gather more detail. For the respondents, because they had seen the questions a particular team member was asking and had to think about and decide on a score to give that person, they often found that they had more thoughts and ideas to provide to their team members, which they at least sometimes decided to go share in face-to-face conversations (often in lieu of writing an open-ended comment). So while the concern was that the tool might discourage feedback conversations, we found anecdotally that it actually increased the number and quality of conversations happening within the teams who piloted the tool.

Keys to Success

Whether this process can be successful depends on a few key areas. First, it is essential to spend time carefully setting up teams, roles, and questions. If the questions do not target critical behaviors, or are not asked in a way that returns actionable data, the survey is a waste of time. Second, make sure that you spend time clearly explaining the purpose of the process and the expected benefits for all who will be involved. You are asking people to invest some of their valuable time and energy in developing their team members, so it is important that they recognize both the value for the other person as well as the benefits that they will receive with stronger team members to work with. Third, it is worthwhile to train managers on how to use the reports during their meetings with the people being rated. The reports contain a host of valuable data and many relevant conversations can result, but if managers are not sure how to incorporate this into a development conversation,

maximum benefit may not be reached. A brief training session can help to jump-start these conversations. Last, it is very important that managers buy into the process and keep up on completing their surveys. If team members observe that their managers never take the time to complete their surveys, they will quickly assume that the process is not very important and will tend to opt out themselves.