

# Beyond Feedback: Breaking the Vicious Circle

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## INTRODUCTION

When interpersonal problems arise at work, many of us have been taught to address them by giving one-on-one feedback. While this technique is often effective, it isn't always a panacea for conflict and behavior issues. This article will help explain why this is so, and suggest a few steps to take when feedback is not enough.

## THE VICIOUS CIRCLE: AN EXAMPLE

So, you've got an interpersonal breakdown at work. It's sticky, and it has brought you and your team's productivity to a grinding halt. Many will suggest – and I agree – that often the best step is to give the other person feedback about his or her behavior. At the same time, I've learned over the years, after countless coaching conversations and consulting engagements, that feedback is not always the answer. Let me illustrate with an example.

Several years ago I consulted to a team that was in serious trouble. They were on an aggressive product development timeline, barely keeping up with the schedule, and in interpersonal breakdown. The group had become polarized—the manager on one side, the team on the other. I was hired to come in and get these guys “fixed.” Give them some feedback, teach them some skills, get them back on track.

As I interviewed everyone to understand what was going on, a clear pattern emerged. The more the manager (I'll call her “Sara”) pushed, the more the team stopped talking to her. The more they stopped talking to her, the more she pushed. So, they could give her feedback, she could give them feedback. She had, and they had, and things got worse. By the time I was called in, they were communicating by terse emails and getting deeper into it every day.

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In my individual and group conversations with them, it became clear they each had only part of the story. The team was wondering: what happened to their leader? Was she becoming a “suit”? Was Sara bucking for yet another promotion? And the more she pushed, the more they balked.

Sara was under increasing pressure from the executive level not only to deliver, but to accelerate the timeline. In fact, she believed she was shielding the team members from much worse pressure than they even suspected, protecting them from the executive perception that maybe they were losing their edge. The more they balked at her efforts, the more she was starting to wonder if maybe the execs were right.

The last thing this team needed was another one-way feedback session, where one side would give feedback and the other would respond. In spite of their best intentions, my facilitation, and all the guidelines for giving feedback in the world, they wouldn't have gotten anywhere. They had to see their pattern of interlocking perceptions and actions, and how that pattern had become fixed in cement. They had work to do, product features to rethink, roles and work processes to fix. But first they had to break their vicious circle before they could start changing the things that could get them back on track.

### GETTING ON THE BALCONY

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, in their book, *Leadership on the Line*, described the wisdom of “getting on the balcony” to see the pattern of a situation. Heifetz wrote that a leader must be able to get some distance from the challenging situation in order to gain perspective. He refers to this practice as “getting on the balcony” in order to see the bigger picture, thus breaking the spell of the repetitive, unsound thinking or agitation that may prevail on the ground.

Heifetz writes: “*‘Getting on the balcony’ captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, ‘What’s really going on here?’ Few tasks strain our abilities more than putting this idea into practice. Without some perspective on the bigger picture, you are likely to misperceive the situation and make the wrong diagnosis, leading you to misguided decisions about whether and how to intervene.*”<sup>1</sup>

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The hardest work is doing what you must when you return to the dance floor.

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If I pull myself off the dance floor to have a broader view, this may require even more courage than giving someone feedback. That's because when I take the balcony view, I need to see my own part as well as everyone else's. We humans seem much better at getting committed to our one-sided version of a story, in which we appear as hero or victim, than a more comprehensive view.

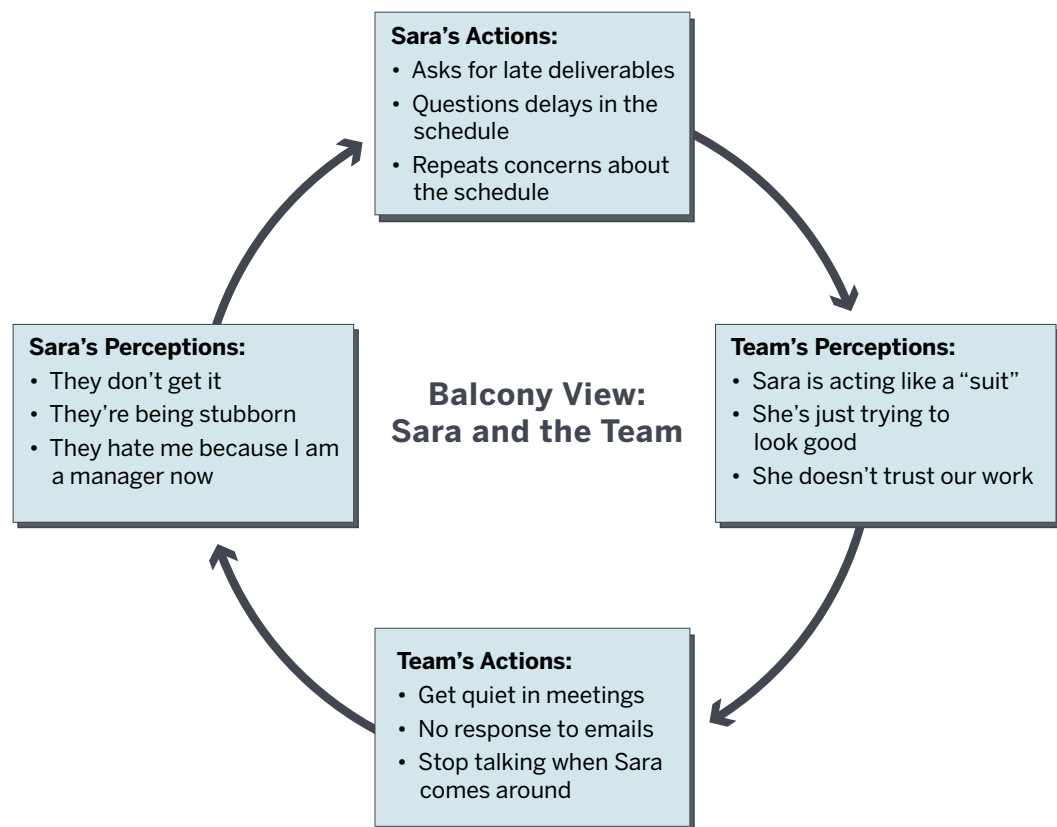
It's so easy to stay in the dynamic, and we all know how a well-fed aggravation will escalate into anger. I have mediated dozens of conflicts over the past twenty years, for groups and individuals at work and in their communities. As the participants explored when and how things broke down, there were usually one or two pivotal events that laid down the course to ruin. By the time I got involved, everyone had made up elaborate stories about not only what the other person or group *did*, but what each party was *thinking and feeling*. The problem is, if the trouble has gone on too long, the stories become intractable. There's too much investment, and too much supporting evidence (since we tend to see what we're looking for). If people can't change the story, they can't break the cycle.

<sup>1</sup> Linsky, Martin and Heifetz, Ronald A., *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*. Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press; 2002.

Fortunately, the team members I describe had the willingness to see their own parts, start talking, and figure out how to do a few things differently. Teams don't necessarily need an outside consultant, but usually can do this for themselves. It just takes one or two influential members to notice a misunderstanding, an unmet expectation, or differing needs. If a group can learn to discuss these issues before they escalate, it's much easier to avoid impasses and breakdowns.

### MAPPING THE PATTERN

It can be useful to map out a group pattern in a graphic to make it easier to see.<sup>2</sup> For example, here's the picture I drew with Sara and the team:



The figure shows where the breakdown began, and the ensuing cycle of misunderstanding, disappointment, and eventual alienation. Once the team saw this pattern, they were able to correct it, and knew what to watch for in the future.

<sup>2</sup> One of the originators of this method, Diana McLain Smith, describes the theory and process in her recent book, *Divide or Conquer*. New York: Penguin Group; 2008. I recommend it as an engaging and enlightening read.

## TWO CAN USE THE MAP, TOO

The same principle, of understanding the bigger dynamic or pattern, can apply equally well in one-to-one relationships. I recently noticed some tension in a working relationship with a fellow employee. He's one of my favorite people, but I was feeling irritated after a couple of our conversations. A small irritation is one thing; it's a different matter if you're still thinking about it a week later, and I was.

Hmmm, I thought, that's worth exploring. From my "balcony," I asked myself these questions:

- *Has this happened before with him and me?*
- *When does it seem to happen?*
- *Was there something I didn't say but was thinking?*
- *What was the one thing he did or said that hooked me?*
- *What was I expecting that didn't happen and what was I expecting that did ("There he goes again")?*

As I let all these questions simmer, I started to see the dynamic. When I mapped it out (it took all of three minutes), I realized there was a repeated pattern in which I experienced being "misunderstood." I saw an aspect of our roles that needed to be clarified because more was at stake than just a few ruffled feathers. And it would never have been solved by "giving him feedback."

## THE HARDEST WORK

The hardest work is doing what you must when you return to the dance floor. Heifetz wrote: *"You have to return to the dance floor if you want to affect what's happening. Staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as ineffective as never achieving that perspective in the first place. The process must be iterative, not static. Next, you need to understand where people are—otherwise you can't lead them forward. Both your survival and your success depend on your reaching a true understanding of the varying perspectives among the factions."* This is especially true if you are one of those factions! <sup>3</sup>

So next time you experience a breakdown in relationship at work, ask yourself: Is this something one-to-one feedback will help? Or is it perhaps a longstanding tango — and the remedy lies in getting onto the balcony?

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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## Feedback:

### *It's still a good thing*

We all live in the world with only the vaguest notion of our impact, and sometimes that matters. Clearly, when we're effective or helpful, we ought to know it. And when our actions are working against us or others, we ought to know that, too. Given how most of us put our heads down and barrel through, sometimes it falls on another person to let us in on what everyone else knows and we probably don't. So feedback is a good thing, when it's done right.

I bet anyone who would bother to read this article has learned the rules for doing feedback right. Make it specific, behavioral, non-judgmental, and about things people can control. It sounds straightforward and obvious, and it takes years of practice. In fact, despite the fact that I teach it all the time, I still make mistakes. So, it's hard to do it right, and the best we can do is keep working on it. A good overview is provided by IA's Michael Papanek here. [www.tinyurl.com/5zowqt](http://www.tinyurl.com/5zowqt)

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### **PATTY MCMANUS**

Patty McManus is a designer, trainer and group facilitator, helping organizations build collaborative skills, optimize performance and manage change. Ms. McManus has worked in the fields of organization development and training for more than twenty years. Prior to joining Interaction Associates, she was an internal organization development consultant for Apple Computer. She also held similar positions at Kaiser Permanente and the University of California. She is a volunteer mediator with Community Boards of San Francisco and the Office of Citizen Complaints. She earned both her B.A. in Psychology and her M.S. in Industrial/ Organizational Psychology from San Francisco State University. She completed postgraduate work as an Organization Development Intern at Kaiser Permanente.

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