

# Quality Education News

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Dear Supporter of Quality Education

## Three 'truths' of feedback that are untrue



*"Telling people what we think of their performance doesn't help them thrive and excel; telling how we think they should improve actually hinders their performance."*

Marcus Buckingham

In the teaching profession, giving feedback to others is a daily duty. Teachers give feedback to children on their school work throughout the day. Out on the sports fields, the coaches are continually giving children advice on how to 'up their game'. Then, of course, there is the end-of-term ritual of handing out progress reports. The reports give feedback on achievements or otherwise of the past term. Is all the feedback beneficial? Is it being done right?

Marcus Buckingham – an internationally recognised researcher on how people best perform in the workplace – raises issues about feedback. He cautions about certain unintended negative side-effects.

Feedback can be good. In fact, it's sometimes essential. Giving people clear feedback ensures that mistakes are reduced. In an English lesson, for example, the teacher might give feedback to a learner who doesn't understand how to structure a speech and has asked for help. After giving the child advice, the child should be able to give a competent speech. Such feedback is beneficial.

Buckingham (2019: 95) describes a type of feedback which isn't good. That feedback is, "... about telling people what we think of their performance and how they should do it better – whether they're giving an effective presentation, leading a team, or creating a strategy." At this point, this is where the first 'truth' about feedback is found to be untrue. He describes it as the **theory of the source of truth**.

It assumes that other people are more aware of your weaknesses than you yourself. Therefore, the best way to help you is to help you see something that you cannot see for yourself. You didn't know yourself that your written exam was littered with grammar and spelling errors. That assumption made by the person giving the feedback is wrong. Actually, you already were aware that there were weaknesses.

The second 'truth' about feedback that's proved to be untrue is that learning is like the filling of an empty vessel. As you lack certain needed abilities, let the feedback person teach them to you. Mirror and match what the person who's giving the feedback is doing. This false 'truth' of feedback is the **theory of learning**.

Being able to learn something new is less than acquiring knowledge from a position of total ignorance but rather, "... recognising, reinforcing and refining what already is." Research has shown that we learn best when we ourselves add something new to what we already understand.

The third false 'truth' about feedback is called the **theory of excellence**. Teachers and coaches give feedback believing that excellence can be defined and analysed; it can be pin-pointed. Do this or do that and you will be superb. Feedback given by someone with this mind frame can suppress individually created levels of excellence. True excellence is usually a one-off, creative and unique interpretation. Think Degas, Picasso, Rembrandt and Van Gogh. Their sublime works were not copy-cats of other artists.

Giving feedback via any of the 'truths' described above, could reflect a form of self-centredness. The feedback person believes in their own knowledge as against the other person's assumed ignorance.

Feedback can, of course, bring about improvements. Yet in the process, there's a need to do so without the arrogance of assumed superior knowledge. Give feedback with quiet assertiveness and authority. Importantly though, do so with dollops of humility. Avoid feedback based on 'false' truths about how it should be done.

Sincerely

*Richard Hayward*

Reference

Buckingham, M & Goodall A 2019. The feedback fallacy. *Harvard Business Review*, March-April, pages 92-101.



This newsletter is a social responsibility project of SAQI.

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Dr Richard Hayward, the editor, does school leadership and management programmes under the aegis of SAQI. Programmes are endorsed by the South African Council for Educators (SACE). Attendees earn Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) points. For workshop details, please contact him on [rpdayward@yahoo.com](mailto:rpdayward@yahoo.com) or ☎ 011 888 3262.

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INSTEAD OF	TRY
Can I give you some feedback?	Here's my reaction.
Good job!	Here are three things that really worked for me. What was going through your mind when you did them?
You need to improve your communication skills.	Here's exactly where you started to lose me.
You lack strategic thinking.	I'm struggling to understand your plan.
You should do x (in response to a request for advice).	What do you feel you're struggling with? What have you done in the past that's worked in a similar situation?
Here's what you should do.	Here's what I would do.

## From mediocre to magnificent

Traditional feedback normally results in some level of improvement. Faults have been pointed out and there's an expectation that they'll be avoided in the future. Mediocre progress is expected. However, if handled skilfully, the feedback can bring about magnificent results. To do so, different feedback techniques are needed. Buckingham (98-101) recommends four strategies. They are:

### 1 Look for positive outcomes

In the classroom, the teacher has intended outcomes of what will be achieved in the lesson. There'll be those times when the children are on track. They're getting the message; they're doing it all right. Seize those moments. Tell them, "That! Yes! That!"

By so doing, you're helping learners get an insight as to what they're already doing right. That helps them to develop and refine what they're already doing well. The teacher knows that children aren't 'blank slates' on which he writes words of knowledge. There's much that the children already know. Build on to that knowledge.

There's a simple classroom maxim that puts it well: Catch them doing right and tell them!

### 2 Replay your instinctive reactions

When giving feedback, try to focus on your instinctive reaction rather than make a judgement on how well the task was performed. We all like positive feedback. Yet there's a problem if superlatives are used. It's for the person giving the feedback to be reminded that they're not the only source of assessment as to something being amazing or awful. Everybody sees excellence in unique ways.

Instinctive reactions to the moments of excellence describe how you personally felt. Phrases such as, "This is how that came across for me" or "That sentence in the paragraph gelled with my own experiences."

Guard against feedback that can unwittingly create in the other person's mind a narrow description of what defines outstanding achievement. There's no single formula.

### 3 Interrupt

Whether a person is doing something badly or brilliantly, feedback requires interruption. Stop what's being done and analyse it. So, for

example, the netball coach could blow the whistle when a player makes foot faults. The intention is to remediate an error. The aim is not to bring about excellence but rather to simply ensure that adequate performance is achieved.

At the other extreme, when someone is doing something very well, interrupt the process. Draw attention to each of the small moments of magic. Buckingham (2019:101) observes, "As you replay each small moment of excellence, you'll ease her into the 'rest and digest state of mind.' Her understanding of what excellence entails, looks and feels like within her, will become more vivid. The brain will become more receptive to new information."

### 4 Explore the present, past and future

When people ask for feedback, they can often be in a problematic situation or not feeling at ease about what they've done. Before trying to discuss a situation, aim to get the person into a positive and open mind frame. This will help make the person more open to new ways of looking at issues.

A possible first question could be, "What three things are working for you right now?" The question could be around the specific topic or something unrelated. The person is likely to start sensing that it's not all doom and gloom.

The second question could be, "When you had a problem like this in the past, how did you successfully handle it?" There's a likelihood that something not too dissimilar happened in the past.

In the third question there's a look into the future. It could be, "What do you already know you need to do? What do you already know works in the situation?"

Through such questions, the person can be helped to finding the solutions themselves and give intrapersonal feedback.

At one level, feedback serves a narrow purpose. It corrects errors. Yet it can be very toxic too. It can impose our will on others; it can dictate our standards. Yet if we want others to really achieve, we need to acknowledge what they're already doing well. We need to affirm them. We need to give them the confidence and freedom to soar.

# The feedback hamburger

COMPLIMENT



CRITICISM



COMPLIMENT



If prepared properly, the end-of-term progress report can be digested well by a child. The comments made by the teacher are a feedback of what's being happening during the term.

Format the remarks in a 'hamburger-style' way. The top bun has a delicious taste. Start out by focussing on the positive. There will definitely be those subject areas of fine effort and maybe of commendable academic achievement. Initial comments could include praise for character and personality traits. Such remarks make the child realise that the teacher has a positive regard and wants the best for him.

Like any hamburger, the middle part is the 'meaty' section. Areas for improvement are identified. Avoid vague remarks like, "David needs to work harder at geometry in Maths." Instead, give specific recommendations. For example, "David needs to get a better grasp of the geometric properties of circles, triangles and quadrilaterals." Point him in the right direction towards improvement.

The bottom bun of the hamburger has the concluding remarks. End the remarks on an affirming positive note. Give the child encouragement to keep on trying. Set exciting challenges to be taken on during the learning walk to never-ending quality improvement. Make sure that the feedback leaves a good taste.



# Be careful with your words!

Children can sometimes prove that the teachers' feedback is wrong by what they achieve as adults. So, teachers always be aware of your written feedback ... especially when it's laced with acerbity and tartness! Here is a sample of report card remarks that certain teachers might have regretted.

## John Lennon

Teachers, Quarry Bank School, Liverpool: *Certainly on the road to failure ... hopeless ... rather a clown in class ... wasting other people's time.*



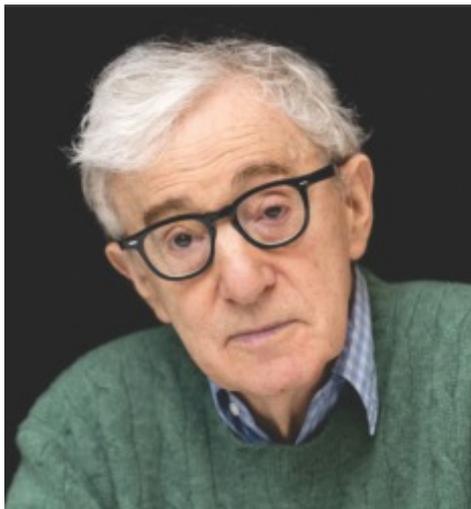
## Dame Judi Dench

Headmaster, The Mount School, York: *Judi would be a very good pupil if she lived in this world.*



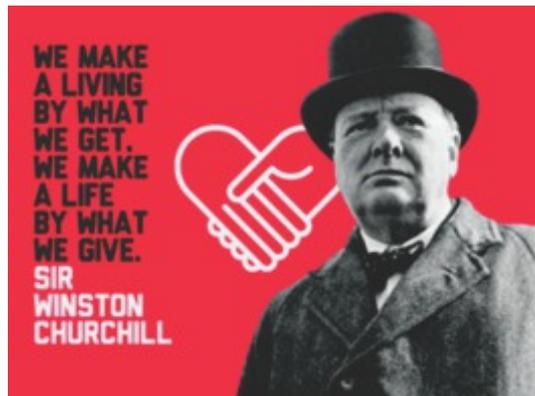
## Stephen Fry

Headmaster, Uppingham School, Norfolk: *He has glaring faults and they have certainly glared at us this term.*



## Woody Allen

Reviewing board at New York University at the end of his first semester: *While cautiously holding out some hope of readmission, suggested he seek counselling for his inability to take life seriously.*



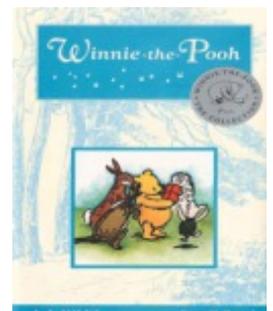
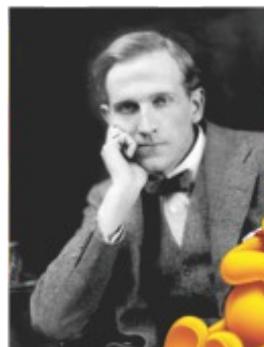
## Sir Winston Churchill

Harrow School: *Constantly late for school, losing his books and papers and various other things into which I need not enter. He is so regular in his irregularity that I really don't know what to do.*

*"I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it through not dying."  
- Woody Allen*

## AA Milne

Aged 12 at Westminster School: *He has done ill, showing little or no ambition, even in Mathematics.*



### Reference

Hurley, C (ed) 2002. *Could do better: school reports of the Great and the Good.* London: Pocket Books.