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NEWSLETTER

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Feedback that connects: Leading with Emotional Intelligence

Giving feedback is a core part of leadership. Done well, it drives growth, trust and performance. Done poorly, it can damage morale and relationships. In today's fast-paced and people-centered work environments, Emotional Intelligence (EI) has become a critical skill to bridge that gap. How feedback is delivered can significantly influence employee engagement and motivation. Leaders who apply Emotional Intelligence — the ability to connect with others on a human level while guiding them with clarity and care — are far more likely to foster growth, trust, and lasting commitment.

What Is Emotional Intelligence?

Daniel Goleman, a pioneer in the field, defines Emotional Intelligence as the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions, as well as the emotions of others. His framework includes five key components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1995). All five are essential when delivering feedback that is both constructive and human-centred.

Why feedback fails without EI

Feedback given without emotional awareness can easily be perceived as criticism. According to psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, in his work on Nonviolent Communication (2003), communication that lacks empathy often triggers defensiveness and shuts down the willingness to change. Conversely, feedback grounded in understanding and respect creates openness and collaboration.

Empower your growth unleash full potential of your organisation.

The Open Feedback Culture (OFC) equips non-experts with skills to use feedback tools effectively and creatively, making them more accessible. Aimed at SME managers and employees, it also benefits trainers, coaches and students. As a new concept, its tools foster open communication and support organisational growth and engagement.

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Key Emotional Intelligence Skills for Giving Feedback

Self-Awareness

Before giving feedback, emotionally intelligent leaders take a moment to reflect: What is my emotional state? Am I frustrated, rushed, or calm? Feedback delivered from a place of tension often causes more harm than good.

Empathy

Goleman emphasizes empathy as the cornerstone of effective leadership. Understanding how the other person might feel hearing the feedback helps frame the message in a more thoughtful, supportive way. Brené Brown also highlights the importance of empathy in building trust and psychological safety at work (Dare to Lead, 2018).

Clarity without judgment

Feedback should be clear, but not loaded with judgment. Instead of saying, "You're not committed to the team," a more emotionally intelligent approach might be, "I've noticed you've missed a few meetings recently—can we talk about what's been going on?"

Regulating the delivery

Tone, timing, and context matter. Feedback should ideally be given in private, at a moment when the employee is receptive, not overwhelmed. As Susan Scott writes in Fierce Conversations (2002), "the conversation is the relationship." How you talk matters as much as what you say.

Encouraging Two-Way dialogue

Emotionally intelligent feedback is not a monologue but a conversation. Invite the employee's perspective. Questions like "How did you experience that situation?" or "What support would be helpful moving forward?" show respect and invite ownership.

The Impact of Emotionally Intelligent Feedback

When leaders integrate emotional intelligence into their feedback style, they create a culture where feedback is not feared but welcomed. This nurtures continuous learning, accountability, and psychological safety—factors that are essential for high-performing teams, as noted in Google's Project Aristotle.

In summary, Feedback is one of the most powerful tools that leaders has. Used without emotional intelligence, it can compromise trust. Used with it, it becomes a catalyst for growth. As Goleman puts it, "Emotional intelligence is not the opposite of intelligence; it is not the triumph of heart over head—it is the unique intersection of both."

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Giving Feedback in Multigenerational Teams: A Growing Challenge

Giving feedback has never been easy, and it is even more complex in today's multigenerational workplaces. Four generations — Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials and Generation Z — now work side by side, each with different expectations about feedback. This diversity enriches teams but also risks misunderstandings if leaders ignore these differences.

An INSEAD article (Dec 2023) stresses that assuming feedback works the same for everyone is the biggest mistake. Baby Boomers prefer formal appraisals, Gen X values clarity, Millennials want frequent recognition, and Gen Z expects ongoing, fast, and multidirectional exchanges. Research also shows that age gaps between managers and employees create tension, especially when younger managers lead older staff.

The Financial Times (May 2024) reports that only 6% of organisations believe leaders are prepared for multigenerational management. Challenges include differing views on technology and communication — for instance, emojis may seem unprofessional to older workers, while long meetings frustrate younger ones. To bridge gaps, companies are adopting intergenerational workshops and reverse mentoring, helping foster understanding and collaboration.

Experts agree there is no single formula. The key is setting clear feedback norms, directly asking preferences, and making feedback a regular practice. Effective feedback across generations requires sensitivity and active listening but leads to stronger trust, retention, and organisational performance. Recognising generational differences is the first step to building cohesive, future-ready teams.

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Interview with Laura Krause, trainer at Obelisk

Laura, why was this project a 'yes' for Obelisk?

We don't just want to develop training courses, we also want to know what really works. This project gives us the opportunity to share our expertise while also learning from other countries. It's inspiring to see how Spain, Portugal and Poland approach feedback culture. Sometimes you recognise a lot, sometimes you notice that culture makes a big difference. That also sharpens our own work.

You've been working on the project for a while now. How did it all begin?

The first step was an online kick-off meeting. There we got to know all the partners and their expertise: Spain in the field of websites, Portugal on evaluations and Poland in e-learning solutions. This was followed by desk research: each country explored the literature on feedback and psychological safety. Based on that, we developed a questionnaire that helps organisations get an initial picture: how strong is our feedback culture and how can we contribute to it ourselves? This resulted in a report with recommendations.

Obelisk took up a leading role in the beginning. What did that look like?

"That's right. We developed a webinar on how people learn and wrote a master guide with essential trainer skills, based on Karin de Galan's teaching methods. This way, internal trainers or managers immediately have a solid foundation to start working with the material. After that, we facilitated a two-day train-the-trainer program."

Erasmus+ is the European programme that funds international projects on learning and inclusion. It connects organisations to share knowledge and develop new training courses together. For Obelisk, this is a logical step: with more than 20 years of experience in soft skills, we bring expertise in feedback, resilience and psychological safety.
"Feedback culture looks different in every country', says trainer Laura Krause.
"That's what makes it so fascinating. With partners from Spain, Portugal and Poland, we are looking for shared definitions and building on each other's strengths."

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And how did that two-day course go?
"It was intensive, but also very bonding. For a day and a half, we delved into how to design skills training, how to write strong cases and how to formulate clear instructions. We not only provided our partners with knowledge, but also with tangible tools: scripts, exercises and checklists.

What can we expect in the next phase?
"In the upcoming months, we're moving towards a testing period. In Spain, we will once again organise a live train-the-trainer session, this time focusing on guiding peer reviews and providing feedback on training materials. That process consists of three half-days. From Obelisk, we will continue to provide the main content framework to ensure coherence and quality. It already feels like we are creating something truly sustainable with this project."

From personal growth to business success: OPEN FEEDBACK CULTURE takes feedback culture to the heart of SMEs

The European OPEN FEEDBACK project is making steady progress in its mission to provide small and medium-sized enterprises with the knowledge and know-how to establish a feedback culture that empowers their employees, promotes continuous learning and strengthens organisational resilience. Based on the growth mindset approach, this project aims to create psychologically safe work environments, where giving and receiving feedback is a natural and enriching process.

The first face-to-face meeting of the consortium took place recently in the city of Poznan (Poland). During this meeting, the partners discussed the self-assessment questionnaire designed to help companies explore the internal conditions necessary to implement an open feedback culture. This questionnaire is currently in the validation phase and will be tested in different organisations in the coming weeks.

In addition, an intensive one and a half day training was carried out, with an eminently practical approach, in which the partners learned how to design effective trainings adapted to the real needs of the companies.

This training will allow the transfer of the knowledge acquired to the different regional contexts, facilitating the implementation of this transforming culture in their respective countries.

OPEN FEEDBACK CULTURE is thus positioned as a key tool to support SME managers, not only in improving internal communication, but also in optimising the mental energy of their teams and building resilient and success-oriented organisations.