Why I Love Negative Feedback

By Richard Martin

We've all heard about feedback and why we need it. We've also heard that positive feedback is much better than negative feedback. In other words, if you want to achieve your goals and get others to work with you in achieving them, you must be positive. Unfortunately, this kind of new age mush obscures the real reasons for feedback. Even more important is the fact that negative feedback is infinitely better than positive feedback.

Feedback is a signaling mechanism to determine the extent to which one is on track to achieving a particular goal. The concept of feedback was developed in the early days of general system theory to explain the behavior of complex processes and mechanisms, like engines and economies. In any open system, there is a cybernetic loop which allows the system to stay within set boundaries. Feedback is the information that is conveyed within this loop in order to keep the system within boundaries. Positive feedback tells the controller that the system is within boundaries. Negative feedback tells the controller that it is outside boundaries. Negative feedback therefore signals a requirement to change in order to get back into the pre-established system boundaries. The paradigmatic example is of a building's climate-control system, where a temperature gauge and hygrometer provide the needed information to keep the temperature and humidity within the building within a set range.

Positive and negative feedback are therefore not moral concepts, but rather useful analogies from systems theory and cybernetics for assessing goal-oriented behavior. Here are some principles to keep in mind when thinking of feedback, whether positive or negative, and some insight into success, failure, and other aspects of human performance.

1. Feedback is a measure of disorder.

Left to themselves, all things will tend to increasing levels of disorder. In terms of feedback and goal-setting, it is inevitable that events will eventually throw you off track in some way. This is not a conspiracy, but simply a fundamental law of the universe. Therefore, in order to achieve your objectives, you must measure your progress, and then apply energy and effort intentionally to get back on track.

2. Failure is negative feedback.

Failure is about missing the mark, and is therefore a cybernetic concept. It has nothing to do with the intrinsic worth of your goal, your self, or your team. This is not about emotions, but simply about performance against a predetermined measure of achievement. Take the example of driving a car, where the driver is constantly monitoring a myriad of signals and measures of performance in order to determine whether he is progressing towards his destination and doing so in a safe manner. If he starts to veer off the road, he simply steers the car back into the middle of his lane. The same goes for speed. In both cases, the driver is using the information provided by his senses and the car's instruments to achieve his goal. This has nothing to do with good and bad, but rather efficiency and effectiveness.

3. Negative feedback conveys more information than positive feedback.

Positive feedback gives little useful information. It simply indicates whether you are on track to achieving your goal. As such, it's a simple "yes" – not much information there. On the other hand, negative feedback gives much useful information, but you must to work to get it. Simply put, negative feedback is any indication of being off track to achieving a set goal or predetermined measure of performance. The question then becomes why you are off track. This may involve a considerable amount of searching and analysis. It is critical to identify measures of performance beforehand. These must be relevant, in that they must convey important information about the reasons for being off track, and they must do so in a timely manner.

4. It's about performance, not ego.

If you keep in mind that failure is form of negative feedback, then it will be much easier to keep emotions and ego out of your assessment of progress. For instance, your self-esteem will most likely not be affected in the least because you must constantly be correcting your speed and path while driving. You don't break down, depressed, and feel like a failure if you must do so. It's simply accepted as part of driving. Most people and organizations invest way too much emotion in "failure". They worry about their self-worth and what others will think. The reality is that most people are much too self-absorbed most of the time to really care about others. Even when they do, it is usually more revealing of themselves and their own low self-esteem than it is of the person supposedly "failing."

5. A demanding goal is likely to lead to more negative feedback.

If you're not failing, then your not trying. If you or your organization do something that is routine and well established, it is very likely that you will produce mostly positive feedback. This conveys little new information and therefore little opportunity for individual and organizational learning. On the other hand, if you are constantly "stretching" to achieve new goals or old goals at a higher level, then it is very likely that you will be failing, perhaps even constantly. The key here is to remember that so called failure is really only negative feedback. If you set out to accomplish something that is difficult for you and your organization, then you need that negative feedback to determine when you're off track, and why. The lesson is to accept the feedback, assess where you are in relation to the goal, and then to adjust your actions to get back on track.

6. Negative feedback is a learning opportunity.

Always identify what you've learned from any experience, whether positive or negative. It's as important to know why you've succeeded as it is to know why you've failed. However, as we've seen, negative feedback conveys much more information than positive feedback. This is because there is really only one way to be right, while there is an infinite number of ways to be wrong. The experience of working through negative feedback in order to get back on track is extremely demanding, but also very rewarding. Failure is the real source of all learning, so long as it is assessed within the context of a pre-established goal or measure of success.

In conclusion, failure is a form of negative feedback. It only exists as a result of trying something entirely new, or something familiar in a new way. Whether you are assessing your own performance, or that of subordinates and your organization, keep this simple fact in mind. Negative feedback should be greatly prized, for it is a measure of the novelty and challenge of your goals. If you analyze the feedback and use it to adjust your path to the attainment of your goals, then you can't help but come out smarter and with a greater level of achievement and performance. Start now to view failure, success, and performance in general as feedback, and stop avoiding novelty and challenges because of the fear of failure.

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