Using Feedback in Organizational Consulting by Jane Brodie Gregory and Paul E. Levy

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BOOK REVIEW

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Feedback is something so universal and often so automatic that, a lot of times, it is given and received without much conscious thinking. But when one considers the invaluable role of feedback in behavior modification, maintaining motivation, or simply evaluating the impact of communication, the organized study of feedback as a process and as a practice emerges as the need of the hour. In the organizational consulting context, feedback plays a crucial role in the socialization of employees, implementation of succession planning or a merger, management of organizational transformations, or facilitation of person–organization fit. But the knowledge that the consulting psychologist relies on while providing feedback is often dispersed—drawn from investigations in different branches of psychology, other behavioral sciences, and even allied disciplines such as economics and sociology. Practitioners and academicians alike are in need of works that collate this diverse information, assess its relevance for a particular field of consulting, and make it easily usable by representing it in the organizational context.

Jane Brodie Gregory and Paul E. Levy's offering, *Using Feedback in Organizational Consulting,* is the second book in the APA Fundamentals of Consulting Psychology Series, so its primary focus is to address the requirements of the organizational consulting psychologist. As a consulting psychologist, one has three significant needs. First, one needs one's actions and recommendations to be based on scientific research findings. This is important not only in terms of facilitating the process of consultation (by depending on prior knowledge, the practitioner is spared of reinventing the wheel every time he or she encounters a novel situation) but also in terms of complying with ethical/legal standards, by making recommendations based on sound evidence-based research (Newman, Robinson-Kurpius, & Fuqua, 2002). Second, one needs to communicate

one's insights to the clients in a manner that is relatively free of academic jargon, structured, and easy to understand. Finally, one needs to build the credibility of one's prescriptions to the clients—something that is easily facilitated by demonstrating the expert endorsement of one's recommended practices. *Using Feedback in Organizational Consulting* is highly valuable in meeting all three needs. It is focused on practitioner-oriented learning and communication, but is firmly based in academic research, and backs every recommendation with appropriate recent evidence from the world of scientific research. As R. L. Lowman clarifies in his forward to the book,

> Gregory and Levy's *Using Feedback in Organizational Consulting* is not a simple "how to" book—though it includes plenty of practical suggestions. Rather, it is a synthesis of what the applied process of giving feedback looks like when integrated with the research literature. (p. ix, Series Editor's Forward)

BUILDING THE BASE: THEORIES OF FEEDBACK

"How difficult can it be, a novice might understandably wonder, to provide effective feedback?" Lowman writes in his introduction to the volume (p. ix). Gregory and Levy clarify that feedback is something that we provide inevitably in any interaction, but considerable skill and knowledge are required in providing effective feedback.

The authors begin their treatise with a succinct overview of the model of the feedback process—starting with Ilgen, Fisher, and Taylor's classic model on the feedback process and moving to London and Smither's model on the Stages of the Feedback Process (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; London & Smither, 2002). Each model is explained in terms of how it adds to prior conceptualizations—eventually contributing to the simplified conceptual model the authors adopt for the rest of the book. This chapter sets the tone of the text as grounded in empirical research and builds the case for feedback being more than inspiring pep talks or honest criticism—as many self-help or popular psychology books would like us to believe.

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APPLYING THE KNOWLEDGE: HOW TO USE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS TO ADDRESS MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS

The authors go on to demonstrate how knowledge of feedback models helps in the actual organizational consulting process, assisted by relatable case studies that use the feedback theories to facilitate individual behavior modification or enhance group productivity. This contextualizes the theoretical knowledge in the introductory chapter, as the reader gets equipped with how to transfer his or her understanding effectively to real-life settings.

UNDERSTANDING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK: ITS VARIOUS DRIVERS

Why do some of us refrain from seeking feedback in public? Why is satisfaction likely to improve after positive feedback while performance may be likely to peak after negative feedback? Would we react differently to the same feedback message when it comes via e-mail versus when it is delivered face-to-face? The book devotes itself to an understanding of the feedback process by looking at its drivers and collating relevant findings with reference to the role of each aspect of the feedback mechanism in determining its ultimate impact: the message (the sign, type, and focus of the message), the feedback provider (credibility, relationship with the receiver, leadership style, power, and status), the method of providing feedback (timing and frequency, medium, and setting), the receiver of the feedback (locus of control, motivation, personality characteristics and self-esteem), and the feedback context (organizational culture and feedback environment). The authors take the reader through citation of major findings in the area of literature on feedback that are not only useful, but also delightfully interesting to read—even for a newcomer to the discipline. Most readers are going to find the examples relatable, personally relevant, and wonderfully insightful into the phenomenon they are out to study.

UTILIZING FEEDBACK IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The concluding chapters of the book delineate various avenues where feedback may be used in the organization—in performance management, training, mentoring and employee development, building self-awareness of leaders, team building, and facilitating organizational change—with suitable cases to demonstrate how effective feedback is indispensable in each situation. The authors also focus on how to utilize feedback from clients to benefit the consulting practice itself, so that consulting becomes a dynamic two-way exchange, flexible enough to cater to the emergent needs of the client.

A BOOK FOR THE PRACTITIONER, THE ACADEMICIAN, THE SCIENTIST, AND THE ENTHUSIAST

Organizational consulting psychology brings the findings of psychology and allied behavioral sciences to the organizational domain—in organizational socialization of employees, implementing succession planning or a successful merger, helping organizations lead change, or facilitating person–organization fit (Lowman, 2002; Thomas, 2010). Literature on feedback within and outside the organizational context is substantial, and has been collated in reviews that have sought to organize the body of knowledge from time to time (e.g., Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2015; Ashford, Blatte, & Walle, 2003). *Using Feedback in Organizations* nevertheless manages to carve out a place for itself by virtue of its strong reliance on scientific theory and research findings, yet does so with an easy, nonintimidating approach that makes the book welcoming for the expert and the nonexpert alike. Overall, it is a highly readable volume covering the latest developments in the field for the researcher, an appealing handbook for the professional wishing to implement effective feedback practices, and a delightful offering of insights into giving and receiving feedback for the general reader.

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