

## I LIKE THE WAY

Marcus Friend is a middle manager in his middle thirties working too many hours for a company that makes kitchen gizmos. He has no enemies that he knows of, not dark, vengeful enemies anyway, although his wife Stella might become one if she ever finds out about his extracurricular activities. But he means well, definitely. Perhaps that is why colleagues seek him out for feedback. Their first port of call really ought to be Human Resources but instead they beat a path to Marcus' door leaving HR none too pleased.

Feedback – is that a word in your vocabulary? Whenever Marcus hears it he starts to arrange his forefingers into the sign of the cross such has been its impact on his life. It is a word whose acquired meaning has – astonishingly it seems to him – not yet reached the dictionary. For this is what you get when you look up 'feedback'.

Feedback *n.* Return of part of the output of a system to the input as a means towards improved quality or self-correction of error.

Here is a definition any refrigerator might recognize, but what if you are a human being? All those words in the dictionary no one ever uses – dossil, hesp, massicot, nucule, skug – but nothing on what has come to take over his life.

Marcus – a small, dark, fine-featured man, good-looking in a Jeremy Northam sort of way – passes his hand over his eyes. He glances round at the wall chart. The left side says 'To', the right side 'From'. The left side looks particularly busy. One slot refers to a meeting held 10 days ago. Christ, how is he going to give feedback on that? What was the meeting about, anyway? Was it

how to support new gizmos? Old gizmos? New and old gizmos? Who was Dervla Jackson? Was she the one in electric blue? Or the one who came on like Courtney Cox? What did Oliver McBain look like? Was he the Harrison Ford look-alike, or the one who stared into space? Or the Harrison Ford look-alike who stared into space? Or none of them? And then there is what is under 'From'. He sees he is due a session soon from his boss, Fred Humbly. Oh, joy.

His PA Julie comes through the door.

'Stella called. Can you call her back?'

Marcus nods. Julie pauses.

'Marky, there's something I've just found out. You ought to know about it. It's about HR.'

'Let me guess. They're to be disbanded. Named and shamed? Stripped of their privileges? Publicly horse-whipped?'

'No, hold your horses, all they're doing is changing their name. In future, they want to be known as HRM. Apparently, it means Human Resource Management.'

Marcus stifles a false yawn.

'Oh do they, the little empire builders. They add a letter and think they've expanded by 50 per cent. It's the oldest trick in the book. Whose bright idea was it to fill HR – I beg your pardon, HRM – with all those psychologists? It's like turning over the asylum to the inmates. They're only called HR because no one could spell Personnel. I wish they'd stick to organizing Xmas parties instead of trying to be strategic.' Marcus deliberately elongates the 'e'. 'Who gives a monkey's, anyway? They'll always be Personnel to me.'

He is aware of Julie hovering.

'Was there something else?'

She hesitates.

'Um ... it's just that the guys wanted me to tell you that they aren't happy with the way you spoke to them the other day.'

He looks her up and down, this long tall sally of a PA with the mouth of an anxious dolphin.

'Thank you for that, Jules; most helpful. By the way, when

you want to give me feedback, please ask me first if I'd like to hear it. And tell the guys to fight their own battles.'

Wounded – nuculed even – she backs out of the door.

Feeling a bit of a skug for dumping on Julie, Marcus hoists his feet on the desk and reaches for what they all laughingly call the “bible”, that repository of tips for giving and receiving feedback compiled by those thoughtful people in HR (not). Flicking the pages he comes across gems like:

*Get the timing right*

*Give feedback as soon as possible after what was observed. The end of the day or workweek is often a good time.*

Why is it a good time? Will people be in the right mood, always assuming you can find them? It's Poet's Day after all. And is it wise or even kind to send people off into the weekend with a dollop of feedback all over them especially if it's not what they want to hear and they have all weekend to brood over it? But, then again, is there ever a good time?

*Don't get defensive*

*Not going on the defensive when you receive criticism is probably the hardest thing.*

Don't get defensive!! Are you serious? He thinks of his people. Would those dossils and hesps be defensive? Is the Pope a Catholic? Do bears shit in the woods? Try to give feedback to some of that lot and there'd be a massicot. Not going on the defensive is probably the hardest thing. Dead right, far too hard.

Marcus wonders why you can't just be a manager anymore. Psychologists and their groupies in HR have a lot to answer for. Before psychos wormed their way into companies people just got on with it and what happened, happened. *Que sera, sera*, the future's not ours to see, *que sera, sera*: ours not to reason why, ours

but to do and die. Haig oversaw the slaughter of many thousands on the Western Front but there wasn't any HR in the British Army to give him feedback on his decision-making. The Tommies could have done that but they were mostly dead. All right, Lloyd George was on his case but Haig wasn't exactly inviting feedback – 'by the way, when you want to give me feedback please ask me first if I'd like to hear it. Sarn't Major, court-martial this man!' Things haven't changed so much in the British Army. HR means what it has always meant – expendable bodies – and HRM means let the last man standing be one of ours.

Elsewhere it's all so different. People want to know how they are doing – or rather they have been told that's what they want. Marcus is not exempt; he too is obliged to learn from others how he is doing.

*Ask for examples*

*Don't be satisfied with hearing 'Great job!' Ask for specific examples that highlight what you did right.*

Marcus remembers the last time Fred Humbly said to him 'Great job!' or some such, and what the reaction had been when he asked for details – 'Oh, Marcus, you are so transparent. Stop fishing for compliments'. He wonders if this office is ready for feedback. Marcus cannot forget once overhearing Fred say, 'If the fifth floor says jump, you jump. If they say feedback may be touchy-feely crap but HR says we should do it, you do it'.

*Use the feedback "sandwich"*

*People must receive some positive feedback. Try offering a feedback "sandwich" of positive, then negative, then positive feedback. The first comments set up the feedbackee to be receptive and attentive. The negative feedback that follows should be couched so it offers an opportunity to correct errors. The final positive feedback should encourage active participation and follow-up.*

Reading this perfectly fatuous piece of advice, Marcus perks

up. He'd never thought about sandwiches like this before. Up to now a sandwich was something you picked up at Pret or ordered at the deli counter – mine's a salt beef and gherkin on rye bread with caraway seeds and double coleslaw. Still. He rehearses the feedback sandwich to an imaginary feedbacker. 'I liked the way you cut the bread for the sandwich – firm, confident, no wobbling. Guillotining the crusts was a nice touch. What I'd like to see you doing more of is ... well ... working on your fillings. My feeling is – it's just a feeling but you have to go with your feelings, don't you? – my feeling about your filling is that this one was a little coarse. Maybe a tad too much spread? Go easy on the mayo in future? Spend a little more on the salami? Milano has a nice appearance, you know, none of those little globs of fat. The same goes for peppered German. But – hey – the sandwich ate very well, a really good mouthful in my estimation. Next time why don't you try making a wrap? No big deal and it would extend your range. Chicken jalfrezi is a fave with me, or go for a roasted veggie number.'

Yes, thinks Marcus, the feedback sandwich is a definite goer. And what possibilities there are. A club springs to mind. Think what you can do with one of those. But it's not all bite-and-go. Tedious as it may be, decisions have to be taken – all of them quantitative. Take a double-decker: is that three bits of positive to two bits of negative feedback, or four positive to one negative? And a triple-decker: is that 4:3 or 5:2 or 6:1? With 6:1 or even 5:2 the feedbacker will be thinking that Xmas has arrived early. In these circumstances the feedbacker will have to be prepared to be unusually and disgustingly oily. 'Everything you attempted was just about perfect. If I had the teeniest-weeniest criticism, which of course I don't, it would be that you try too hard at times. You ask too much of yourself, don't you?' A possible variation on the last that you might want to consider is: 'you're a martyr to your work, aren't you?' If you are operating the 6:1 model you might find you need to add an extra portion of unction. 'You expect too much of others, don't you?' should suffice if you can manage to get it out. If you have reached this point you are now dealing out

sheer unadulterated praise and will have discarded the slices of bread some time ago. As for the sticks that hold the club together you could use them after the session to puncture yourself repeatedly in return for being such a smarmy jerk. It's just as well the four-decker is impossible to handle.

*Avoid gridlock!*

*Keep in mind that for every person receiving feedback, a dozen or more people will need to give feedback. Evidently, potential feedbackers can get quickly overwhelmed with requests to provide feedback. Every request for feedback needs to include a date by which feedbackers need to reply.*

Gridlock – God, Marcus thinks, I can relate to that. It's like that thing with vampires. If every person infected by a vampire becomes a vampire soon the world will be full of vampires. If the number of feedbackers is set to rise exponentially will there be enough people in the world to give feedback? There certainly won't be room for vampires *and* feedbackers even if some of those are bound to be vampires. In a way a vampire is a feedbacker in reverse; two negatives and a positive instead of the other way round. What would be the positive? Something along the lines of 'I like the way you bare your neck'. So not really a positive.

Marcus looks round at the wall chart, and then smartly away again. The clock says that it's time for lunch. Let's see. What do I fancy today? Something cool yet hot, something modern yet satisfying, something a little out of the ordinary but not too experimental. There's only one sandwich that fits that bill. Crayfish and rocket with chilli mayo in a ciabatta – that will do nicely.