



# Want to improve as a leader?

Written by Cam Yenokida

©2024

[www.achieve-excellence.com](http://www.achieve-excellence.com)

Achieving YOUR Excellence is our only mission.

Try driving in an unknown area at night with your headlights off and blindfolded. This can be a dangerous way to navigate through any trip.

***“When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.” – Viktor Frankl***

In a professional sense, the way to avoid this is through feedback. Feedback can be one fantastic roadmap to excellence.

It allows you to see things clearly and maps out the best direction forward. It brings light to what is already working and provides a guide for more growth and effectiveness. It is the lifeline of any successful person, team, and certainly Executive.

The problem is that most people either aren't aware of how critical feedback is or simply don't understand how to solicit responses in a way that can dramatically improve results.

Moreover, there can be a negative connotation around the topic in general. People almost expect feedback to be a list of things they do wrong, when in reality, feedback can be a great source of reinforcement and learning for an individual's growth as a leader.

***“We all need people who will give us feedback. That's how we improve.” – Bill Gates***

Here are some common misunderstandings around how feedback.

- If someone sees something I'm doing wrong, I'd expect them to tell me
- I don't want to hear the feedback

- I'm afraid of what they might tell me
- I am a top performer, so I don't need feedback
- I'm an Executive, so there's no value in getting feedback

The truth is that when you go for your next promotion or ask to be put onto a special project to improve your skillsets and give you exposure to Executive Leadership, the hiring manager or decision-maker in those scenarios will want to gather feedback on your performance and ability to excel within the new opportunity.

The next time you implement a new strategy, or communicate a change in the business process, or improvement to an existing platform, your team and your clients will have an initial response or feeling to this announcement.

So, wouldn't you rather know how your team will respond or what your current reputation is like?

More importantly, wouldn't you rather gather this information early so that you can either know you're on the right track or proactively make the appropriate adjustments?

That's exactly why feedback matters. It gives you valuable context as to how you operate in each space and provides you with an opportunity to enhance your abilities.

***“The greatest obstacle of discover is not ignorance – it is the illusion of knowledge.” – Daniel J. Boorstin***

[www.achieve-excellence.com](http://www.achieve-excellence.com)

Achieving YOUR Excellence is our only mission.

***“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.” - Aristotle***

This could be leadership effectiveness, technical or sales ability, managing and developing people, client experience, and much more.

For this article’s purpose, we will focus on leadership effectiveness.

Some leaders don’t even ask for feedback or wait until it’s too late. Annual performance reviews risk being an ineffective way to receive feedback because it often only occurs once per year and can be a “too little, too late” scenario for you to understand and improve upon any major blind spots you might be demonstrating within the team.

When leaders do seek to understand the impact of their behaviors, they tend to think too narrowly by only searching for feedback from a single source or dimension. They will ask their direct report(s).

Some might go a step further and ask their supervisor. Maybe a few will consider counterparts in other departments.

***“There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.” – Nelson Mandela***

Because of this, I’d encourage you to think of feedback as multi-faceted or 3-dimensional.

Having 3 dimensions allows you to better understand the impact you make on the entire business unit or organization (depending on your specific role).

It allows you to break down a larger effort into smaller, specific behaviors that can provide a much clearer roadmap to improvement.

***“Lack of direction, not lack of time, is the problem. We all have twenty-four-hour days. – Zig Ziglar***

This is much like the difference between a prism and a magnifying glass. A magnifying glass is like getting feedback from just 1 person and typically brings to light one major or glaring aspect of the specific thing in view – in this case, you.

A prism on the other hand, passes light through a multi-dimensional object (or process in this case), breaking down light into each of its unique components. Here are the critical dimensions for feedback.

- 1<sup>st</sup> Dimension – Yourself
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Dimension – Your direct supervisor and your direct reports
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Dimension – Your peers (ideally 3 – similar role but in a different business unit or department that you or your team interacts with consistently)

In some cases, I’ve even suggested taking it one step further and soliciting feedback from your direct reports’ direct reports too. This would truly give you some context as to how effective you are at leading through others.

Consider, as well, another dimension of asking close family or friends.

*At the turn of my 43rd birthday, I embarked on a journey for deeper discovery of who I was and how I was showing up in the world.*

*My intent was to ensure that the direction I was heading was in-line with my life's purpose and that I could continue growing toward my desired outcome.*

*I carefully selected people I trusted and respected for their unique talents and perspectives.*

*I chose my wife, my executive coach, 3 friends from the past, 3 friends from the present, and 3 former colleagues.*

*I asked three specific questions:*

- 1. How would you describe me?*
- 2. What worthwhile skill sets, characteristics, or abilities do you believe I bring to this world?*
- 3. What blind spots do you believe are holding me back from accomplishing remarkable achievements?*

*The results were breathtaking. The honor I bestowed upon these close confidants strengthened our relationship.*

*The observations and feedback they provided offered me a roadmap for moving closer toward my life's biggest goals.*

*I took away behaviors I can commit to doing more of, habits I can abandon, and advice to consider adopting...all to show up better for myself, for those I love and to move closer toward my desired outcomes.*

In addition to seeking feedback from too few sources, these requests can often times be too vague. Such as, "do you have any feedback for me?" or "is there anything you think I can be doing better?" or even worse, "how am I doing?"

The issue here is that this won't start a productive conversation around specific behaviors or actions you consistently demonstrate.

It can also lead to an incomplete picture of what you're truly trying to accomplish – growth and development to produce better results.

By implementing multi-dimensional feedback, you will benefit from considering multiple perspectives that will help you identify strengths and prioritize opportunities.

Starting with your own self-evaluation is an important step because you will be testing and enhancing your self-awareness.

Your own assessment allows you to compare and contrast how you view yourself with how you are showing up for your team.

***"If you are not afraid of the voices inside you, you will not fear the critics outside you. – Natalie Goldberg***

Now, before you go and schedule 1 on 1's or coffee meetings to simply ask how things are going, let's dive into a few key components, along with sample questions you can consider for a more impactful conversation.

[www.achieve-excellence.com](http://www.achieve-excellence.com)

Achieving YOUR Excellence is our only mission.

### 1. Schedule time in advance

People will appreciate time to think about the questions you're asking vs. just springing it on them at a moment's notice. This will also improve your chances of receiving fully formed observations and specific examples.

***"No matter how good you think you are as a leader, my goodness, the people around you will have all kinds of ideas for how you can get better. So for me, the most fundamental thing about leadership is to have the humility to continue to get feedback and to try to get better – because your job is to try to help everybody else get better." – Jim Yong Kim***

### 2. Tell them why you are asking

Communicating the why behind your requests helps others around you understand your intent. It's important so that they are aware of the purpose of providing you a thoughtful response.

People should understand that you seek to improve your effectiveness with the team and/or business and that their opinion matters.

***"There is nothing noble in being superior to your fellow man; true nobility is being superior to your former self." – Ernest Hemingway***

### 3. Make it 'OK' to be honest

This is critical to ensure that people (especially those that report to you) feel comfortable with being honest.

There can be a hesitancy in delivering negative feedback to superiors for fear of retaliation

[www.achieve-excellence.com](http://www.achieve-excellence.com)

Achieving YOUR Excellence is our only mission.

later down the line (i.e. I'll get passed up for promotion if I tell the truth or I'll lose my job if I share this).

You can do this by proactively letting these others know that there will be no judgement or hard feelings from the feedback they share and reinforcing the WHY behind why you're asking.

### 4. Make it specific

People need to know exactly what you would like to have feedback on. So, I'd encourage you to give them a specific list of questions in advance so that they know what they are supposed to prepare and share with you.

You should also encourage them to consider a rough timeline (6 months to a year), because it can be human nature to simply think of their most recent interaction or experience.

***"Success isn't about the end result, it's about what you learn along the way." – Vera Wang***

Here is a list of potential questions to consider:

- What do you believe I am doing that positively impacts you or our team? Be specific and provide examples if possible.
- What do you believe I should stop doing or be more aware of to positively impact our team's success? Be specific and provide examples if possible.

- What do you believe I can incorporate into my leadership approach to become even more impactful?
- What would you recommend I consider implementing to assist us in finding even greater success as a team?

***“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” – Maya Angelou***

The third question is my favorite because I passionately believe that some of the best ideas come directly from the team, and this will help empower people to bring forward ideas that they might not share in public settings.

5. Smile, listen, clarify and thank

It is important to remain positive and curious through this conversation. This looks like smiling, leaning forward in your chair, and making eye contact.

It might sound like “do you mind telling me more about this?” or “by chance, do you have an example you can share?”

***“The art of conversation lies in listening.” – Malcom Forbes***

The behavior of active listening regardless of how positive or constructive the feedback might be is critical.

Your ability to listen will either reinforce making it ‘OK’ to be honest or potentially shut down the

conversation quickly. So, pay attention to your body language.

Lastly, always make sure you thank the individual for taking time to prepare feedback and share a few key items that stood out.

This is a great way to ensure they know you were listening and feel appreciated for helping you develop even greater success.

***“The measure of intelligence is the ability to change.” – Albert Einstein***

Once you’ve collected all the data, you can look for themes or commonality within what was shared. You can do this by consolidating the feedback into responses to each question. Assign a point each time a theme is mentioned.

For example, one person might say “you really talk too much” and another might say “you should listen more.” Well, these two are connected which means this category would receive two points. If it was also on your own self-assessment, then it should now be at three points.

This simple process is meant to prioritize both your positive behaviors within the team and your opportunities for improvement.

Plus, if you have multiple people suggesting the same new idea to improve the business then it’s definitely something to consider.

***“None of us is as smart as all of us.” – Ken Blanchard***

The byproduct of generating ideas from the team is it will also give you tremendous opportunities to empower and elevate others to contribute to the organization's success in a more meaningful way.

After you've had time to review your findings, I'd encourage you to connect with a trusted advisor to expand on ways in which you can use these newfound directions to generate progress toward becoming a more enlightened and effective leader.

A partner can assist you in developing the roadmap to implement changes and share best practices that they have adopted in similar situations.

Especially as you identify any gaps between your own self-evaluation and the feedback you're receiving from others. You'll want to explore these conflicting themes quickly.

I'm not suggesting that everything being shared is accurate or warrants adjustments. Take for example, people recommending you implement paid steak dinners for the entire staff weekly.

Or perhaps someone says that they want you to stop taking lunch breaks to be more effective in the role. Probably not the feedback you'd likely implement.

***"Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself." – Leo Tolstoy***

However, if you believe your communication is effective and three of your direct reports feel

otherwise, then guess what?? You need to work on your communication.

I'm reminded of a famous quote by Maya Angelou.

*"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*

It ultimately won't matter what you think about this because your people are signaling a much brighter spotlight on your behaviors and actions.

So, take off the blindfold and turn on the lights to a path that will increase engagement, unlock hidden solutions, and produce results.

***"Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life, and you will call it fate." – Carl Jung***

[www.achieve-excellence.com](http://www.achieve-excellence.com)

Achieving YOUR Excellence is our only mission.