

'I highly recommend this book to anyone looking to improve their relationship with feedback.'

Sarah-Jane Allen – chief of staff, Google DeepMind

Can I Offer You Something?

Expert ways to overcome the horrors of **organisational feedback**



Becky Westwood

Feedback has become a bit of a curse in organisational culture. Most people hate giving or receiving it, whilst everyone believes it is essential for people to grow and develop. At last, a book that actually addresses this honestly and openly, dismantling the myths, helping us understand the psychology of feedback and, most importantly, be better at having the conversations that help us and others thrive at work.

Karen Meager – organisational psychologist and author

This book has helped me gain a deeper understanding of my own reactions to giving and receiving feedback and provided tools for navigating it more effectively.

It's a surprisingly easy read, using data and research to help you understand not only how to give better feedback, but also how to receive and process it in a more constructive way. It goes beyond practical steps, offering the 'why' behind it all, with real-life examples that resonate.

I highly recommend this book to anyone looking to improve their relationship with feedback, whether giving or receiving. It's a valuable resource for understanding your own reactions and harnessing the power of feedback for growth.

I especially loved that it doesn't offer a one-size-fits-all solution, exploring the various models we've all encountered. Well-researched, thought-provoking and applicable to everyone – even if some of it feels familiar, it's all the more powerful for it.

Sarah-Jane Allen – chief of staff, Google DeepMind

This fabulous, compact book has practical tips for giving and receiving feedback, some of which I have implemented already. Difficult conversations are made easier when we are in the right frame of mind and able to hear what is and isn't being said. I found the tips inspiring and immediately useful. I liked the quotes that showed me how the advice has helped other people, demonstrating that it's not just theoretical. A great read that I shall be recommending to others.

Dr Sam Powell – GP and GP trainer, appraiser and coach

How is it that feedback can so often demotivate people rather than inspire them?

This is the question that Becky Westwood's excellent book answers. It's packed with practical exercises, tips and techniques to help people have better, more positive conversations about performance.

Even before we get to the main part, the contents list gives an indication of the straight-talking style of this practical, well-researched book.

The first sentence of the first chapter was a game-changer for me. From then on I was hooked. Even though I'm a manager with 30 years' experience, this book made me reconsider how I have been giving feedback and how I can approach it in the future to make sharing my perspectives with my staff an encouraging and inspiring experience.

Peter Andrews – senior manager, local government

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Can I Offer You Something?

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Foreword

It's great to finally see this book in print having discussed it and heard Becky's passion around the ideas in it for a number of years. It is also great to see this book in print *now*. It comes at a time when a fundamental shift is needed in how organisations engage in their people development, particularly in relation to feedback. I love the title as it sums up exactly the challenge I see with feedback, which often looks like, and is presented as, a friendly offer of helpful advice and guidance. However, all too often the feedback is nothing more than someone else's preferences or needs – a point that Becky expertly explores in detail with useful examples throughout her book.

Becky has long had a strong view, which I share, about the need to change the relationship with feedback in organisations. It's no surprise having worked with Becky for over ten years that she shares these views, her expertise and her experience in the same relaxed, accessible and humorous way that I have seen her do in

her leadership coaching and training over many years. This style really helps you, as the reader, to connect with the ideas and concepts easily. The book invites you to think about feedback in a fundamentally different way, why change is needed and what you could consider doing instead.

My own interest in feedback and my frustration with it started over 30 years ago when I had my first encounter with it. At the time, it felt like it was important and I could see the potential benefit of getting the views of more experienced colleagues and managers. Sadly, I found myself generally left feeling confused, often that I was failing in some way and unsure what I should do with many of the comments I received. Where I could see that changes would be helpful, I was unsure how to implement them in a way that reflected me and aligned with my values. Since those early days, I have seen the increasing drive for a homogenised, overly processed approach to feedback as the biggest challenge with the feedback culture within organisations. This not only applies to feedback; it is happening in leadership and management development and training, and the negative impact on manager and leadership skills, confidence and ability has only got worse the last 30 years. Such was my own frustration with the organisational approach to training and development in my own corporate/organisational career that I have spent the last 20 years working with forward-thinking leaders and organisations to put the human being back into the process, make the advice practical and relevant to the person themselves and keep it real. This has been grounded in the three organisational and leadership

books I have co-authored with Karen Meager, *Real Leaders*, *Time Mastery* and *Rest. Practise. Perform.* that all seek to make organisations and organisational development practical, grounded in reality and actionable. In that journey I had the great fortune to meet and then, for the last ten years, work with Becky to bring this to the world.

Becky and I have shared many a long discussion about the limitations and at times positively unhelpful ways in which feedback is used in organisations. We shared a view that all too often the apparent advice being given was really personal preference or things that should have been given as a direct management instruction dressed up as feedback. This book, and the research and expert advice that Becky shares in it, come at a very opportune time as I share her view that we need to get more real with feedback, see it for what it really is and look for better ways to support people to grow and develop.

The content of the book is the product of the new research Becky has undertaken in the last few years on feedback as part of her master's thesis. This research is enriched and brought to life by her expertise and experience in people development for over 20 years in a wide range of organisations. The basis of this book, Becky's research and expertise, has been used efficiently and effectively where it is necessary and relevant to help you, as the reader, question and update your understanding of how to use feedback – perspectives, as Becky more accurately calls them. There is a very natural flow between the theory and practical examples. This helps you to both understand what

feedback is really about and suggest how to make tangible changes in your relationship with it that are helpful to you and those around you. What struck me as I read is that in addition to helping you change your relationship with feedback, it gives you an important understanding of how feedback is received and felt by others. The book is practical with ideas you can action immediately and others that have a longer-term implementation and impact exploration. The key point that I love, and Becky brings to life throughout the book, is the need to bring the human being back as the focus of feedback.

This book invites you to consider a new and updated approach to your own development and those around you and I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did.

John Mclachlan, organisational psychologist and CEO,
Monkey Puzzle Training

Preface

'I love feedback' isn't a sentence you hear very often, and even as I wrote this book the irony wasn't lost on me that at times I was feeling anxious about getting feedback on a book about feedback and anxiety – we psychologists are humans too! Despite this, many people understand the benefits of hearing different perspectives. Everyone experiences feedback differently and, based on my own academic research into the relationship between feedback and anxiety, this book explores what can be learned from individuals with social anxiety and how their experiences can help anyone have a healthier and more purposeful relationship with feedback in an organisational setting.

Part 1

**Feedback is hard (but it
doesn't have to be)**

1

Introduction

What if you called feedback ‘perspectives’? What if you said hello to the human in front of you and just had a conversation? What if you used perspectives to create possibilities?

As an organisational psychologist, trainer and coach, I’ve spent much of my career working with individuals, teams and leaders in organisations of varying sizes across the UK, Europe and the US. I’ve had many of my own opportunities to give and receive feedback and heard countless stories about the nerves, anxiety and fear people felt as they encountered feedback in their organisations.

The feelings described to me were inspired by experiences of both giving and receiving feedback, so I became curious about what made feedback so difficult for people. It’s as if they become resigned to the fact that exchanging feedback is like an emotional rollercoaster that they must keep on riding. Underneath it all, people want to be recognised for their contributions, learn about opportunities to develop themselves or support the

development of others. Through my research, I wanted to explore the possibility that exchanging feedback could be something different, something simpler, more purposeful and without the extreme emotional ups and downs of unnecessary anxiety.

The truth is that everyone feels anxious at different moments in their life – it's normal. In that sense, anxiety is universal – you don't need to have an anxiety problem to feel anxious. Everyone has their own personal relationship with feedback. Our upbringings, educational experiences, relationships and history all impact our attitude to feedback, how we process it and what we do with it. We'll explore all of this in detail later in the book.

In organisations, the two go hand in hand, as feedback often provokes anxiety in both the person providing it and the person receiving it. People providing feedback become preoccupied with not saying the wrong thing, not upsetting or offending the receiver and not demotivating them with their feedback. People receiving feedback become anxious about the unknown of what might be said, how to action any feedback and the vagueness of the feedback's content.

One of the main reasons that people find feedback challenging is that, for most, their work is more than work – it's part of who they are. It's not just something they show up and do for a few hours. For example, when someone says 'Your presentation could be better', people hear 'You could be better.'

Imagine you've always been worried about X during a presentation and then Y happens. You know you've messed up and are feeling rubbish about it – then your manager wants a debrief...

Imagine you're a manager who wants to support your team and you notice that someone's doing something in presentations that could stop them from doing so much better, but you're not sure why they do it or if they're even aware...

Exchanging feedback can end up feeling incredibly personal. The highs are engaging, motivating and encouraging. The lows can feel judgemental, confronting and disheartening. No wonder people feel anxious about doing it, and the anxiety makes the whole thing worse as people try to rush through it, avoid it or make up unhelpful stories about what they're experiencing. It becomes a vicious circle of pain and dread.

While organisations strive to address this by creating positive feedback cultures, they're mostly successful in principle rather than in practice. This leads to a lost investment of time and money for those organisations. They put resources and effort into designing feedback processes, investing in feedback tooling and provide training in how to give feedback – none of which will necessarily address the anxiety of sharing feedback or increase people's use of it. As a result, this translates into a lost opportunity for the development and recognition of their people.

If people continue to limit their interactions with feedback and don't give themselves an opportunity to practise the skills involved, on an individual level, people start to disengage with feedback. They avoid seeking it and giving it until it becomes a stressful and inescapable activity to undertake at the annual performance review. If, like many people in organisations, you go into feedback meetings with 'I just want to get it over with' ringing in

your ears, you're likely to miss an opportunity to develop and this might create unintended people dramas that need to be solved later.

What if there were a different way?

The more I specialised in working with people with social anxiety, the more curious I became about how their experiences in the workplace compared to those without social anxiety.

If everyone experiences anxiety in some way when it comes to feedback, my goal was to provide people with an opportunity to learn from those whose anxiety experiences were more acute. I wanted to bring levity to a serious topic and make discussing it in the workplace more accessible. I'm not saying that everyone needs to disclose their anxiety at work, but it's possible to work with your anxiety to find out what it is you need and then use that awareness to help you have a conversation, ask a question and build a relationship with feedback that serves you.

This book is for managers, leaders, colleagues, providers and recipients of feedback in business and organisations. Whichever side of the feedback exchange you're on, sharing effective feedback is a collection of skills that, when done well, takes account of anxiety for all involved. These skills can be learned and I'll show you how.

If you want to support people with their growth or maximise your own development, this book can help you find practical strategies that work for you. Everyone experiences feedback differently and, based on my own academic research into the relationship between feedback and anxiety, the findings of which are explored in Chapter 3, this book explores what can be learned

from individuals with social anxiety and how their experiences can help anyone have a healthier and more purposeful relationship with feedback in organisations.

How to use this book

At any moment in your career, you could find yourself on either side of feedback. This book is about learning from academic research and individuals' lived experiences to improve how feedback is perceived and used by everyone for the benefit of those who want to use it for their development. If you're offering feedback, it's about increasing your confidence around the whole exchange, increasing effectiveness and feeling less anxious. If you're receiving feedback, it's about coming out of the feedback exchange feeling encouraged, valued and empowered.

As you progress through the book, I'll present you with findings from two recent studies that I conducted into the use of feedback in organisations. I'll explore three of the most common feedback models used in organisations and some feedback mnemonics – their strengths and limitations along with the myths surrounding feedback. In the chapters that follow, I'll unpack these myths in greater detail, offering insights into how they might show up for you and others so you can build up a holistic picture of the feedback dynamic.

Whether you're the provider or receiver, in Part 3 of the book there are some initial reflective questions for you to consider, to build up your awareness of your relationship with feedback. You'll also find exercises and techniques you can practise and actions you can take, based on your role in sharing feedback. These tools will help you

to design your own personal approach to feedback and learn about what works for others to enhance its effectiveness for you and those you're working with.

I want you to have more choice about how you use feedback. Whatever past experience may have led you to believe, whatever you might have made it mean in your own mind or whatever you might have been told about feedback until now, if it's not useful and it's not serving you, put it to one side. Instead, give yourself permission to do something differently with feedback.

As you work through the chapters, you'll read about the experiences of some of my clients and research participants in their own words. All the quotes, examples and case studies have been used with permission and, to respect their confidentiality, the people involved can't be identified. In some of the examples, you might recognise moments where you've done or seen similar things; that's OK, we've all been there. The key is, if you can understand why they might have happened, you have a greater influence on changing how they happened and stopping some of them repeating in the future.

This book isn't solely intended for people who experience anxiety at work; instead it's for anyone who wants to learn from these individuals' experiences. It invites you to reconsider and reimagine your relationship with feedback, take feedback off its over-complicated pedestal and make it more accessible. It won't offer you another generic model of feedback but instead will support you in designing and putting into practice personal strategies to get the most out of your own and other people's perspectives in support of your goals.

Do you cringe at the mention of feedback, dreading the awkwardness or potential conflict it may bring?

Or perhaps, as a manager or leader, you struggle to articulate your feedback constructively, worried about how it may be received?

With a warm blend of empathy, expertise and thorough research, organisational psychologist Becky Westwood explores a refreshing approach to both giving and receiving feedback at work as she takes you on a journey that reveals the transformative power of feedback – without the fear!

Whichever side of the exchange you find yourself on, this book gets right to the heart of feedback dynamics. Challenging the effectiveness of conventional approaches, it provides expertly researched, actionable strategies that transcend the trepidation and uncertainty, instead paving the way for personal empowerment and organisational growth.

Whether you want to support others in their growth, maximise your own development opportunities or simply enhance your interpersonal skills, *Can I Offer You Something?* is your definitive guide to conquering your anxieties and unlocking the true potential of effective feedback.

'Inspiring! A fabulous read that's immediately useful and makes difficult conversations easier.'

Dr Sam Powell – GP and GP trainer, appraiser and coach

'At last! A book that dismantles the myths, addresses feedback honestly and openly and helps us and others thrive at work.'

Karen Meager – organisational psychologist and author

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