

# Giving Great Feedback in Software Development Teams

TESTCON EUROPE 2020 ONLINE CONFERENCE  
October 15, 2020

**Jason Wick**



# Welcome

## ★ Who am I?

*Jason Wick, Senior Manager, MakeMusic*

## ★ What excites me?

*Guiding people to the next level*

## ★ Why this topic?

*Not an expert, want to improve*

# Outline



Level set and **define** feedback



Feedback in **context**



Feedback **tactics**



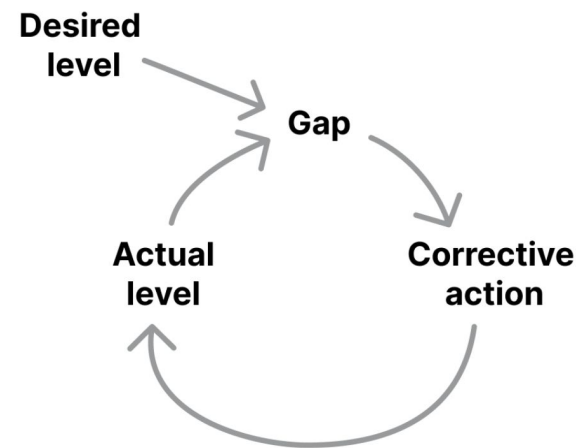
## **Level set and define feedback**



# feed·back | 'fēd\_bak |

Think of a thermostat.

**Feedback**, in our context, is information about someone's **output**, used to **self-regulate**



# History Lesson

Don't worry. It's short and only a little boring.

**“Feedback”** used in reference to **humans** in  
1955 Journal of Experimental Psychology

- **Positive** effects on goal-directed behavior
- Provides information in pursuit of a **goal**
- Correcting past errors **corrects** future errors
- Increases rate of **improvement**, especially early in task
- Level of **specificity** increases potential

# Types of Feedback

There are two types. Or four. Or maybe more.



# Types of Feedback

~~There are two types. Or four. Or maybe more.~~ Let's simplify.

**Constructive** correct the past

**Positive** affirm the past

**Constructive feedforward** avoid in future

**Positive feedforward** improve future performance



# Types of Feedback

~~There are two types. Or four. Or maybe more.~~ Let's simplify.

**Constructive** correct the past

**Positive** affirm the past

*More to come!*

**Constructive feedforward** avoid in future

**Positive feedforward** improve future performance

# Feedback and Learning

- **1955 Journal of Experimental Psychology**
  - specific feedback improves potential in pursuit of a goal
- **May 2018 Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology**
  - adult performance benefits from positive feedback as a type of learning, especially in lengthy tasks

# Feedback and Learning

## 2019 Harvard Business Review

- “The Biggest Hurdles Recent Graduates Face Entering the Workforce”
- only a few have college careers with consistent qualitative feedback (theater, creative writing, music)
- loss of consistent feedback coming automatically from grades
- they’re wondering if they need to improve and how to improve

# Feedback and Learning

## 2019 Emory University Rollins School of Public Health

- “Professional Feedback” from alumni blog
- “I thought about my ultimate objectives: complete my job duties, foster collaboration, maintain open communication with colleagues, and have that communication be pleasant whenever possible. Notably, only one of those depended on the skills that were graded in school.”



# Rapid Fire Feedback Stats

Lots of numbers. Lot and lots of numbers.

**37% of people don't give positive reinforcement**

# Rapid Fire Feedback Stats

Lots of numbers. Lot and lots of numbers.

*37% of people don't give positive reinforcement*

**only 14.5% of managers  
strongly agree they are  
effective at giving feedback**

# Rapid Fire Feedback Stats

Lots of numbers. Lot and lots of numbers.

**44% of managers believe  
giving developmental  
feedback is stressful**

# Rapid Fire Feedback Stats

Lots of numbers. Lot and lots of numbers.

37% of people believe  
managers don't give positive  
reinforcement  
44% of managers believe  
giving developmental  
feedback is stressful  
only 14.5% of managers  
strongly agree they are  
effective at giving feedback

**37% of managers said that  
they're uncomfortable having  
to give direct feedback**

# Rapid Fire Feedback Stats

Lots of numbers. Lot and lots of numbers.

**21% of managers admitted  
they avoid giving  
developmental feedback**

# Rapid Fire Feedback Stats

Lots of numbers. Lot and lots of numbers.

**69% of managers are uncomfortable communicating with their employees**

# Recap



Definition



History



Different Types



Learning



Market Numbers



makemusic.



## **Feedback in context**





# Manager → Employee

Providing feedback is a core part of a manager's job.

*Context:* 1-on-1 meetings/conversations

- Behavioral observations
- Skill development
- Quality of work
- Performance reviews





# Manager → Employee

part of a loop

comes from the right place

focused on problem

1 “Last week we talked about your desire to improve your end-to-end mindset. I was thinking about this and brought some suggestions for online classes about using Jenkins that could help develop this skill.”

not a surprise

specific

focused on problem

2 **via Slack:** “Could we meet in a few minutes to discuss today’s standup?”

**face to face:** “The tone of how you responded to Tim’s question this morning was rude and unprofessional, and that could be a barrier for safe communication in the future.”

impact



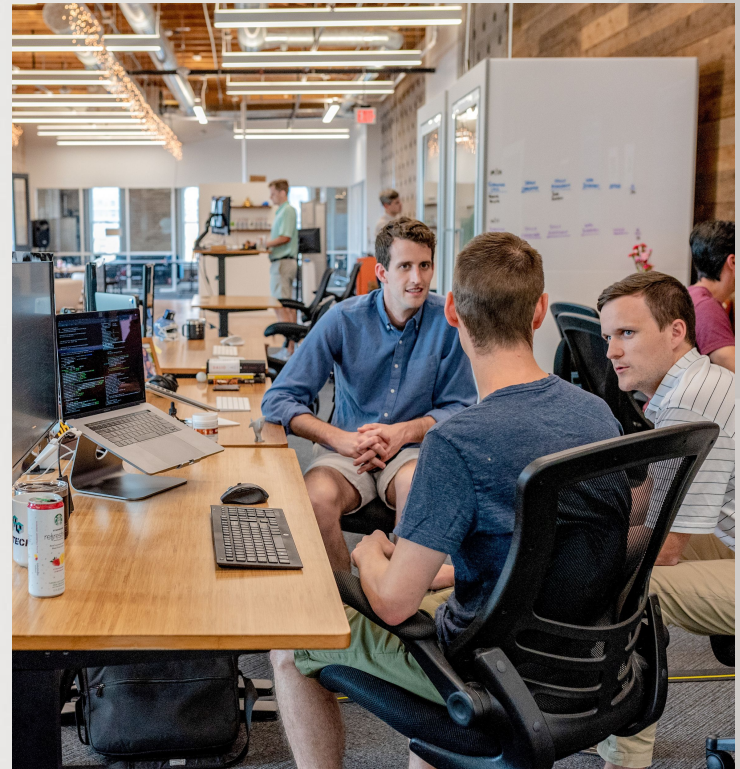


# Employee → Manager

Employee feedback to their manager is underrated.

*Context:* 1-on-1 meetings, team meetings

- Leadership development
- Cultural alignment
- Team dynamics
- Ground level observations





# Employee → Manager

1

impact

*"It would help me have better 1-on-1s if we had a shared Google Doc to populate in advance of the meeting."*

specific

*"I think if we implemented some metrics around code coverage, it could help us all take unit testing more seriously."*

comes from the  
right placefocused on  
the problem

makemusic.





# Peer → Peer (same job)

In healthy teams, this is more powerful than hearing from the boss.

*Context:* team workflow process

- Code reviews
- Retrospectives
- Approach to HOW
- Knowledge sharing





# Peer → Peer (same job)

part of a loop

```

3129 3135 {
3130 3136     [self killScrollEndedTimer];
3131 3137
3132 - _scrollEndedTimer = [[NSTimer timerWithTimeInterval:kEventDurationMillisecond * scrollWa.
3138 + NSDictionary *callbackData = [[NSDictionary alloc] initWithObjectsAndKeys:
  
```



impact

specific

There might be a memory leak here. You could either use `dictionaryWithObjectsAndKeys (autorelease callbackData, or release it after passing it to timerWithTimeInterval below)`. Can you run it through static analysis too just to see if the issue is caught there too.

- This feedback is specific and helpful
- It offers suggestions
- It makes a request without condescension



# Peer → Peer (different job)

Cross functional learning happens here.

*Context:* cross-functional team

- Mentorship
- Sharing principles
- High level best practices





# Peer → Peer (different job)

Option 4. (edited)

4:58 PM **Product Owner** I don't see much of a benefit to option 4 tbh

4:59 PM **Developer** Which option do you like most?

5:10 PM **Developer** The reason why I like this option (4) over the others is because it's more flexible, and the [redacted] team would own the language and localization process. With options 1 and 3, we would be dependent on the web team to update strings on their code base. With option 2 we either block the web team until we've deployed [redacted] or the UI for an unrecognized error would be just a number. (edited)

Apologies for the walls of text.

focused on the problem

5:31 PM **Product Owner** Consider the user view too, not just what each approach does for us

5:37 PM **Developer** I think I am considering them, let me know if I'm missing something. With option 4, our customers will get a message in their language, except for new errors, for which they will temporarily see an English message until we deploy a new version [redacted].

I'll ponder this more today. Thank you for your input, and apologies for the walls of text

- Product Owner provides opinions directly without disrespect
- PO offer a reminder to the developer to make considerations in the future



# Recap

- ✓ 4 relationship contexts
- ✓ Each has different dynamics
- ✓ Each has different value
- ✓ Principles are the same  
(stay tuned!)



## **Feedback tactics**

# Feedback principles

Before trying tactics, let's understand why they're **good** ones. Further, let's focus on what makes feedback **effective**.

## Effective feedback:

- is not a surprise
- comes from the right place
- focuses on the problem (not the person)
- focuses on facts
- is specific
- shares the impact of the behavior
- is part of a loop

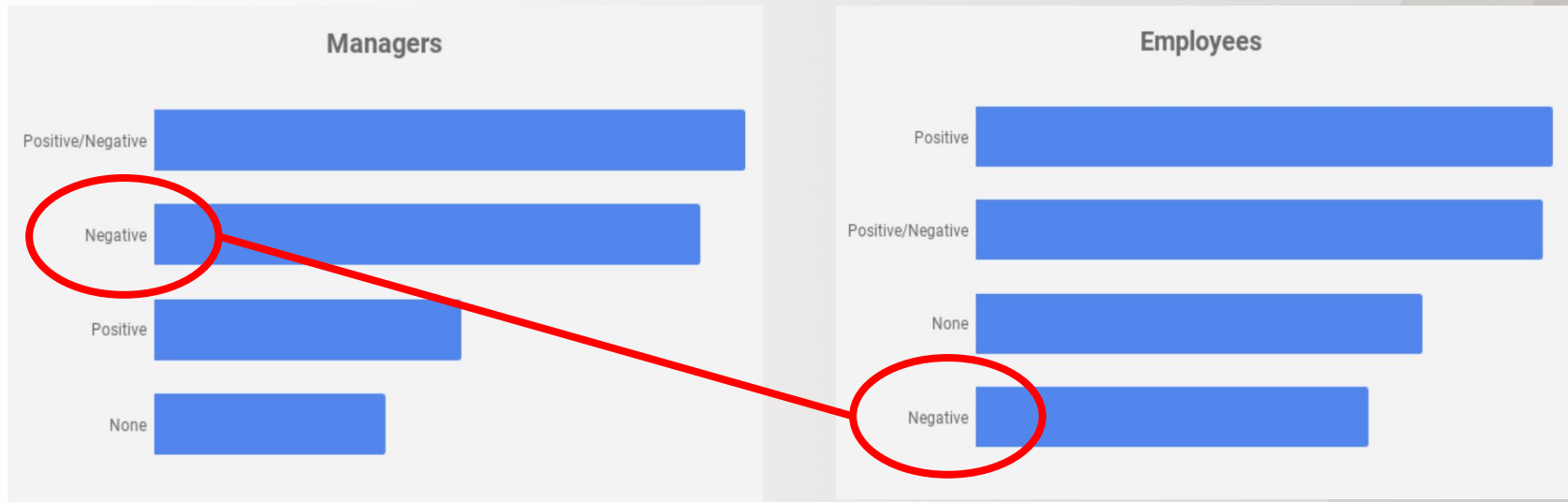
# Tactic #1 - Effective Feedback

## Praise as Productivity: Deliver Positive Feedback

### “Which types of feedback are most effective?”

Forbes Leadership December 2018

“The Mind Games Of Feedback: What Your Manager Is Struggling To Say And What Do You Want To Hear?”



# Tactic #2 - Effective Feedback

## Maniacally Remember and Revisit Why

“When giving feedback, always remember the why: feedback is important because it strengthens teams, and helps individuals learn, grow, and achieve their potential.”

Forbes Leadership December 2018: “Taking the Fear Out of Feedback”

# Tactic #2 - Effective Feedback

Maniacally Remember and Revisit Why

**While preparing to deliver feedback:**

- Remember this is for **improvement**
- Remember it's **rarely as bad** as you think
- Use the “why” as your **guide** around which all your feedback is **centered**

# Tactic #3 - Effective Feedback

Implement a Retrospective

If you're having trouble with feedback but there's psychological safety

try retros

- Get participation
- Can leverage anonymity
- Make the topic about yourself, if you're the manager

# Tactic #4 - Effective Feedback

Deliberately Practice with a Feedback Buddy

Find someone you work with to hold you **accountable**:

- Build **community of practice** or center of excellence
- In a team setting, have your buddy provide **instant feedback**
- This gets into a mindset of being **outside your comfort zone**





# Let's chat!

LinkedIn

[linkedin.com/in/jasonallenwick](https://www.linkedin.com/in/jasonallenwick)

Email

[jasonwick7@gmail.com](mailto:jasonwick7@gmail.com)

Twitter

[@jasonallenwick](https://twitter.com/jasonallenwick)

## Resources

- Images take from <https://unsplash.com/>
- Journal of Experimental Psychology “Effect of psychological feedback upon work decrement” - R B PAYNE, G T HAUTY 1955
- <https://federation.edu.au/staff/learning-and-teaching/teaching-practice/feedback/types-of-feedback>
- <https://untools.co/balancing-feedback-loop>
- <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6431777/>
- <https://hbr.org/2019/04/the-biggest-hurdles-recent-graduates-face-entering-the-workforce>
- <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/epi/prospective/professional-feedback>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackzenger/2018/12/16/the-mind-games-of-feedback-what-your-manager-is-struggling-to-say-and-what-do-you-want-to-hear/#328961e72845>
- <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jimbarnett/2018/12/21/taking-the-fear-out-of-feedback>