**A Feedback Role Play**

**Abstract**

This session will discuss role play exercises designed to help students develop feedback giving and receiving skills. The role plays are geared towards graduate and undergraduate students in a traditional classroom format. Communications skills are fundamental for leaders and they are indeed skills, we can work on developing and strengthening them. The role plays serve as an introduction to the challenges and opportunities of providing and receiving feedback across different power positions. The session will discuss how to effectively debrief the exercise and connect it with key insights on best practices.

Keywords: role play, feedback, communication skills

**A Feedback Role Play**

**Introduction**

Providing and receiving feedback are key skills for leaders and managers. There are many challenges to them, providing/receiving negative information, negotiating different power levels, making sure that the key points get across and that there is a plan for improvement if needed. These are all things our students will have to deal with at work and that they can develop and strengthen their skills to do it effectively. I find that role plays can be an excellent way to introduce the topic, assigning the students a role and giving them the task to provide and receive feedback gives them the opportunity to experience some of the natural roadblocks that occur in the process. I debrief the exercise and then I introduce some of the best practices for the process. The students respond positively to the exercise and it does elicit the challenges it is designed to bring up.

There are two scenarios for the role play, one where the manager wants to provide mostly positive feedback to the employee and one where the manager needs to provide mostly negative feedback to the employee. In both scenarios, the employee has feedback to provide the manager. The role plays are written in two different sets, one with sororities and fraternities primarily for use with undergraduate students, the other takes place in a business context aimed at graduate students. The exercise can be used in a leadership, organizational behavior or communication class. The exercise is geared towards traditional classrooms.

**Theoretical Foundation**

The role plays aim at creating an environment where students will learn to identify behaviors and communication patterns that contribute and hinder the feedback process. There are a few points that I try to elicit during the debriefing and then cover in a lecture aimed at sharing best practices.

Feedback refers to communication that provides information on how someone is performing (Caproni, 2012). Sounds simple but, in reality, there are many things that get in the way of feedback giving and receiving being effective. Effective feedback can help people be more effective and motivated at work (Baldwin, Bommer & Rubin, 2008; De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider, 2011). Providing and receiving feedback are skills that can be improved on by learning about best practices and by reflecting on our own experiences.

As a manager, the first step is to create a culture of openness where people feel safe to provide and receive feedback (Caproni, 2012) A culture where there are no failures but instead learning opportunities and asking for feedback does not result in negative perceptions. A key step is to provide ongoing feedback (De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider, 2011; Osland, Kolb, Rubin & Turner, 2007), this way people are used to it and it is part of the normal business operation, and finding opportunities for positive feedback.

In terms of providing feedback these are some of the best practices:

* Choose the right moment and place (Caproni, 2012). Ideally, we should find a time where the other person is in the right mindset to receive the feedback, not during the race to finish a deadline for example. In terms of place, the usual rule of thumb is that you can praise in public or private and criticize in private but we must be mindful of cultural norms.
* State the purpose of the feedback (Caproni, 2012). We should explain why we are having the conversation and what the goal is for it. This helps people understand the context of the conversation.
* Provide positive feedback (Caproni, 2012; De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider, 2011; Osland, Kolb, Rubin & Turner, 2007). If the feedback is all about issues that might be construed as negative the recipient is likely to reject it and become defensive. By including acknowledgement of the positive contributions the person makes to the organization one avoids pitfalls.
* Be specific and descriptive. Do not use generalizations like “you never” or “you always” (Caproni, 2012), the person hearing this will remember the one time this did/did not happen and discount the content of the feedback. Do not criticize the person but instead focus on the behavior (Baldwin, Bommer & Rubin, 2008,). Some of the best advice I have received in this area was to use the CAR system, Context, Action, Result. One begins by stating the context in which the issue arose. Then proceeds to describe the action the other person took. Then the result from one’s point of view without assuming intention on the other’s part. Other authors advocate similar ideas (Baldwin, Bommer & Rubin, 2008; De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider, 2011), discussing the action and then one’s reaction to it. Providing these specific examples can help reduce defensiveness and provide a common experience for both parties to discuss.
* Check that the receiver understands what one was trying to say and whether they agree or not (Caproni, 2012). This is an important step to make sure that the feedback has been received and understood. Sometimes we might need to repeat certain information as it might have been missed.
* Create action steps and discuss the consequences of the feedback (Baldwin, Bommer & Rubin, 2008; De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider, 2011; Caproni, 2012). After providing some time for the receiver to process the information it is important to discuss next steps on how the person can alter their behavior in order to improve. It is very helpful to prepare some suggestions that the recipient can use in case they cannot come up with something. We should also ask whether there is something we can do to support the recipient in their goals. There should also be a discussion of what are the consequences if things do not improve. Here creating goals that are measurable and with clear deadlines will be useful.

In terms of receiving feedback, these are some of the best practices:

* Be open (De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider; Osland, Kolb, Rubin & Turner, 2007). This requires a willingness to hear things that might be difficult. It is important to try to keep our own defensiveness at bay in order to be able to learn something new. One might even disagree with the feedback one is receiving but if one keeps in mind this that there is something to learn from it, it can become a positive experience.
* Practice active listening, this way you can make sure you understand what the other person is trying to communicate. I find helpful to take notes to make sure you remember everything and that also gives you some time to process the information.
* Ask for examples if it is too general (Caproni, 2012; Osland, Kolb, Rubin & Turner, 2007). This will help put the information in context.
* Explain what are your next steps and ask how you can improve (Caproni, 2012; De Janasz, Dowd & Schneider). This will signal that you are serious about improving and that you have a plan on how to accomplish your goals.
* Thank the person for giving you feedback. It is not always something people are comfortable with so we must appreciate their effort.
* Verify the information (Osland, Kolb, Rubin & Turner, 2007). It can prove useful to ask different people so that we might get a more well-rounded impression of our performance

**Learning Objectives**

The students will develop their skills and gain knowledge of best practices in receiving and providing feedback.

**Exercise Overview**

The exercise and corresponding lecture can take place during a 50-minute class session, but it would be better to have 75 minutes for a more detailed debriefing. No materials are needed except for copies of the role plays. The trick of course is to have an even number of students, in case of an odd number I would suggest assigning one person the role of observer. In small classes where I know all my students well, I assign pairs directly, I choose people they do not normally work with so they are less familiar with each other. In larger classes this might not be possible, I would suggest people calling out numbers one to four and those would correspond to specific roles.

There are four scenarios (appendices A, B, C and D). Appendix A and B are geared towards undergraduate students, C and D are geared towards graduate students. Appendix A describes a scenario after a party organized by a fraternity, the roles include a member of the organizing committee, and then the Chair in charge of organizing events. While the party was successful there were some problems in the preparation phase that the chair seems to not be aware of. While the chair is ready to provide some positive feedback and some concerns, the member is supposed to provide feedback to the chair as well about the problems that took place. Appendix B scenario deals with a sorority party where one of the people assigned to set up is absent and the Chair believes this had a negative impact on the party. Both the Chair and sister have issues they need to bring up. In universities without the Greek system one might substitute the fraternities and sororities with student government organizations.

Appendix C scenario takes place in a marketing department, the roles include a line manager for social media advertising and the marketing manager. The scenario mirrors the sorority scenario. Appendix D scenario takes place in a R&D department after the successful completion of a project. The scenario mirrors the fraternity scenario.

The key elements of the scenarios are that both parties have positive and negative things to say to each other and that the two roles are at different levels of the hierarchy.

After distributing the roles, I allow for 5 minutes for the students to read over their role. They pair up and usually within 10 minutes they have completed the exercise, you can allow for an extra couple of minutes for any stragglers.

The debriefing begins by asking the students whether both of them received feedback. Usually we see that the people with the roles of manager or Chair do not receive feedback because their higher power position created an obstacle to the lower level role to provide the feedback. This begins the discussion about how power differentials can make such a dramatic difference and what managers might do to reduce it. Then I ask whether they know what their next step is to deal with the situation. Usually few pairs develop key actions steps to take following the conversation. Then we discuss what were some of the things they did that helped them make their points and what did not work. Most do not clearly communicate the extent of the issue preferring to minimize the problem and not provide what is perceived as “negative” feedback.

I follow the exercise with a discussion of the key theoretical best practices and discuss how the might have made a difference in their conversations.

**Session Description**

In the session, I will provide the theoretical background I use to guide the debriefing and ensuing lecture on providing and receiving feedback (10 minutes). I will then discuss the specifics of the role plays and the debriefing of the exercise (10 minutes). I will make sure to discuss my experiences with it and the different responses from the students. I will reserve the rest of the session to discuss some of the challenges of leading role plays, how to encourage the students to take on the roles as their own and what other skills can be part of the discussion. This will be highly interactive as I want to learn from others how they manage similar exercises and related topics.

**References**

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**Appendix A**

Feedback Skill Practice

Edward Fraternity Philanthropy Chair

This is such a great year for you. You have been part of the fraternity for 3 years now and have been appointed to the position you always wanted, Philanthropy Chair. You get to organize events and manage the relationships of the fraternity with the charities it sponsors. This position is not only fulfilling personally but is helping you develop skills for your future job. Your latest event took place last weekend, the “Big Partay.” You assembled your team about a month ago and had the most successful fundraising event in the history of the chapter, it broke records. The headquarters of the fraternity called to congratulate your chapter and the success of the party was documented in the school’s newspaper.

One of the members of your team was particularly good during the planning and organizing of the party. Mitchell is a legacy brother, most of the male members of his family have been part of the fraternity, when he pledged he was an ideal fit. You are very happy with his performance and were impressed by the role he played in this event.

He went above and beyond the call of duty even staying up a couple of nights in order to make sure that everything would be ready on time. You think he has a lot of potential to move up to the board. You are a little worried because he is so intense at work and you have seen it before, brothers that get too involved that burn out and end up hating being part of the fraternity’s events. You would like for him to learn to pace himself. You think he is a great asset for the fraternity and would like him to keep participating.

On the wings of the success of the event you have decided to schedule a feedback session with each one of the team members. This is something that previous Chairs only did when projects go wrong but you believe it should always be done to learn from what went right and be sure to repeat it.

Mitchell is first.

Feedback Skill Practice

Mitchell brother in charge of organizing the “Big Partay” fundraising event.

You were so happy the day after rush when you found out that you were going to be a full member of your fraternity. Almost all of the males in your family have been part of this fraternity so it was very important for you to continue the tradition. This is your second year in the fraternity and you were assigned to help organize this party for the past month. The party took place last weekend. It was one of the most successful parties in the history of the chapter, it even broke the fundraising record. The headquarters of the fraternity called to congratulate your chapter and the success of the party was documented in the school’s newspaper.

You like working directly on projects, you don’t really see yourself becoming part of the officers of the fraternity nor part of the board. You like the hands-on experience but do not want a lot of responsibility or politics.

Edward, the Philanthropy Chair, seems to be regarded as an exemplary brother. You had heard a lot about him but had not had the chance to work with him until now. You had not interacted much before now and you have to say that you are not all that impressed by him. You thought that the planning of the party was disorganized and the timeline for organizing unrealistic. You found yourself having to do what felt like everyone’s job because no one was there on time or had done their assigned tasks. Twice you had to use your own money to pay for stuff or it would not have made it in time for the party, you will be reimbursed but it is not supposed to be like that. You are very serious about doing the best job you can, you understood that this event was important for your fraternity, and you were willing to do what is necessary to have a successful event but you do not like having to go to such extremes to do it. You had to stay up for two days straight to have the place all set and ready for the party. You believe that this could have all being avoided if there had been a clear and organized plan for the party.

You do not know the Chair well enough to know how to approach the topic, but you are worried that the next time something has to be planned it is going to be the same thing.

You just got an email from Edward requesting a meeting for feedback. You are worried since you thought that in the end everything had gone well. You ask some of the other brothers about it and they say that these meetings usually only happen when something goes wrong. They also tell you that everyone that was part of the organizing team has received a similar email.

You are first.

**Appendix B**

Feedback Skill Practice

Christine Sorority Social Chair

This has been a difficult year, you are looking for an internship without success while at the same time trying to keep up with the requirements of being Social Chair. Your sorority is known for the high-quality events it organizes. It is a point of pride for you all, and of envy for the rest. You take your role as a sister very seriously, your experience here has not only helped you grow but also develop skills that will be useful for your future career.

One of the key yearly events is the “Spring Fling.” This year’s party took place last weekend. You began organizing this party about 3 months ago. You assembled a team and gave everyone a list of tasks to accomplish. Last week you also gave them a list of their jobs on the day of the event. There were some complaints but they need to learn to deal with adversity, you know this well, and you told them to manage. You were particularly worried about Natalie who was assigned to set-up. This is her first year in the sorority so you understand she is a bit new but you have noticed that she is late many times and, well in a word, she seems flaky.

The day of the party arrived and there was no sign of Natalie anywhere when it was time to set up. She had done all of the things assigned to her previously but that day was the key, that day was the party. The other girls working on the set-up had to cover for her and ended up exhausted. This is not what you wanted, you had enough people so that they would not tire themselves too much and then could enjoy the party. But then Natalie disappears and the plan gets messed up. You were so mad. You knew part of it was the stress from the dinner about a potential job that you had to attend after the party. You had to leave at 8 pm, when the party was supposed to be over. There are always people still hanging out at the time and is tradition to stay longer. You trusted all the girls assigned to clean up. They knew you had to leave and had assured you that everything would be done. Their attitude seemed to make Natalie’s absence stand out even more, here were these sisters ready to take responsibility while this other one does not even call. Someone suggested calling her but you think it is her responsibility to be in touch.

The party went really well. Everyone loved the decorations, the music, everything. The clean-up crew did a great job and the hall was pristine.

You are reflecting about the party; all Chairs leave notes for the next Chair with tips for success. One thing stands out like a failure and it was Natalie. You decide that you need to talk to her. She needs to understand what is expected of a sister, and it is not what she has been doing. You send her a text to meet you this afternoon.

Feedback Skill Practice

Natalie - Sister part of the team organizing the “Spring Fling” yearly party.

This has been such a great year, you were invited to join the sorority of your dreams. Ever since you had visited the campus and learned about them you had hoped you would be one of them one day. That day arrived, and it was better than you expected. Your sorority is known for the high-quality events it organizes. It is a point of pride for you all, and of envy for the rest. You take your role as a sister very seriously, you know it will help you develop skills that will be useful in the future.

One of the key yearly events is the “Spring Fling.” This year’s party took place last weekend. You were part of the team that organized it. The person in charge of the event was Christine, the Social Chair. She is a nice girl and a good sister but a bit strict. The first meeting was three months ago and she came in with folders with everyone’s name on it and in them were all the different things you had to do in preparation for the party. She never asked what you wanted. You swapped some of your assignments with some of the other sisters because they caused conflict with your classes. In the end it all got done, and to you that is what counts. Last week Christine gave you a list with what you were supposed to do on the day of the party. When you saw the list, you were dismayed you were assigned to set-up duty and you know that you are not good in the mornings, you have a hard time being on time and that is why you would rather be assigned to something later. Some of the other girls and you complained about the assignments but Christine said to tough it out. She is completely inflexible and you think she does not like you. You were happy when she invited you to be part of the team but you have noticed that she seems to expect you to fail.

The day of the party arrived and it is one of those days when everything goes wrong. You went the night before to stay with your aunt in a nearby city who was not feeling well. You left in a hurry and forgot to take your computer and cell phone. Your aunt was a bit better in the early hours of the morning and you finally went to bed. Of course, you overslept. You could not believe it when you opened your eyes and saw the time. You would barely make it in time for set-up if you left right away and raced through the highway. You decided then that it did not make sense to go in such a hurry when it was likely that you would be there late anyway. You thought about calling but then realized that you did not have your phone. All your contact numbers are in there and you could not recall any. You took your time, had a little chat with your aunt and then left thinking that you would probably be more useful for clean-up anyway. Traffic was worse than usual, and you made it to the party at 8 pm right when the party was supposed to finish. The party continued for a while as it always does but you noticed that Christine was not around. You asked about her to one of your sisters and she told you that Christine had to leave for an interview but that she was furious with you for not showing up.

You are frustrated you never wanted to do set-up since you know you are bad about being up early. Christine would not listen and now you are likely in trouble.

You stayed around and helped clean up. The party went really well. Everyone loved the decorations, the music, everything. The clean-up crew did a great job and the hall was pristine.

The next day you are working on your homework when you receive a text. It is from Christine she wants to see you this afternoon.

**Appendix C**

Feedback Skill Practice

Joan group manager for the Barbie marketing group in Mattel.

You have been in your position of group manager for the past 5 years. It is a challenging position. Barbie is the most established brand in Mattel. Although there has been very little growth you have managed to keep the large market share Barbie has enjoyed for years even in face of more intense competition from other seemingly “cooler” dolls like Disney Princesses. Barbie still reigns supreme but not by as much as before.

You are in charge of the different marketing campaigns. Your group develops the concepts and works with the advertising agencies to develop tv and radio spots, newspaper and magazine ads, and recently internet advertising.

You really enjoy your job, you have invested a lot of energy to reach your position and have been careful to keep an ear on how people are feeling and how things are. You never liked those bosses that seemed to live in a different universe than the people they supervised. You keep close to your people. You make sure to know all the decisions that need to be made and what your people are thinking about them.

Your experience has been mostly on tv advertisement. That is what you used to do until you were promoted to this position. The internet advertising is the one area that you feel the least comfortable with as you do not have direct experience with it. By the time it came up you were already in a management position. You have learned about it. You read trade magazines and have attended a couple of company sponsored training sessions.

The internet advertising seems to be working, well it is hard to say because it is not really clear how to estimate the effectiveness of this type of advertising. But for how it is measured at the company it does seem to be doing its share. The effectiveness has been climbing steadily. You have a feeling there is a potential for more impact but are not quite sure how to get it.

Louis works in your group and is in charge of the internet advertising portion of the business. He has been in the firm for two years. During these two years he has been in the same position and you have been happy with the performance. He seems to be on top of the work and has not had a late delivery ever. Well, there was that time that it was really close but you had built in some slack in the time frame you gave him and it was ok. Your boss never found out.

Lately though, you have been hearing some comments from the people at the advertising agency. The comments you heard were that Louis is a bit of a tyrant, he does not listen to what the agency proposes and always wants his way. You were surprised and asked around to the other line managers and some of they agreed that yes, he is a bit of a tyrant but is because he knows what he wants.

It is very important for a marketing department to have good relationship with the advertising agency. They are the source of marketing ideas, they design the image of your product and usually a company has more than one account with an agency. Therefore, a problem with the agency will not only affect the Barbie account but others as well.

You are concerned. You have worked with the agency for quite some time. Actually, you were the one that brought them in originally and it has worked well for all parties. They seem to know how to best market Barbie. If they are saying there is a problem, and other colleagues confirm it ,you believe it is important to confront Louis with the information and get him straightened out. Being able to have a good relationship with the ad agency is important for Louis to be able to move up in the marketing organization. You know he is young this is just his second job after college but you think it is never too early to begin building the way up.

You have scheduled some time with him this afternoon. You asked for this meeting through an email that just said you wanted to talk to him. This is not very common but also not unheard of. You think you have a good relationship with your people and do not think that the email would be received with fear.

Feedback Skill Practice

Louis: line manager for the Barbie marketing group in Mattel in charge of internet advertising.

You have been in your position of line manager for the past 2 years. It is a challenging position, Barbie is the most established brand in Mattel and you are in charge specifically of the online advertising for the brand. Barbie has managed to keep the large market share it has enjoyed for years even in face of more intense competition from other seemingly “cooler” dolls like Disney Princesses. Barbie still reigns supreme but not by as much as before. The online advertising group is a new group, actually you are the first manager for it. The company is not really clear on how to make the most out of the web but you feel you are doing a good job at it.

You worked at Google right out of college and this is your second job. Working at Google you learned the other side of the internet business so you feel pretty confident that you know what you are doing. It is different from doing tv advertising or print ads. You have to keep up with new developments and know about technology.

Your boss Joan seems pretty competent. Whenever you have had a question she has been available and usually knows the answer. You have noticed though that she does not really understand internet advertising. Like most marketing managers her experience was built with other forms of advertising.

You really enjoy your job, you have a lot of ideas of how to grow the brand’s presence on the internet and really take advantage of all the new opportunities that exist. You have been waiting to present these ideas until you feel that you have established yourself and the company trusts you. You are beginning to think it might be time but are not really sure since your boss seems to not be completely convinced about your skills. She wants a lot of reports and details about what you are doing. She always wants to have a say in the decisions and this has slowed you down repeatedly.

Joan has been group manager for the past 5 years. You have heard that she climbed the corporate ladder pretty quickly excelling at her previous positions. She expects work to be on time but you also have noticed that she builds some slack in her schedules as if she were expecting people to not be on time. There was that project that you were running late on, you were all stressed about it and then when you turned it in she was not really worried because she had padded the deadline. This was maddening, you had not slept and all for nothing in the end.

You just received an email from your boss asking you to drop over her office this afternoon for a chat. This rarely happens and you were commenting on it and one of your coworkers mentioned that Joan had been asking about your relationship with the advertising agency. That is when it clicked for you. You have been having some disagreements with the agency about how to use the online budget. You feel that the agency is a bit old-fashioned and is not really up to speed with new developments. You have managed to convince them of doing things your way and they seemed to agree in the end that your way was better. All the indicators that the company uses to measure the effectiveness of internet advertisement have shown a definite improvement and are reaching levels that no one had expected very quickly. This has filled you with satisfaction about your accomplishments.

You know that the relationship with the advertising agency is important, especially since they also manage other accounts for the company, so you have been careful to not hurt anyone’s feelings. You are wondering why your boss is asking about it when you thought it was all settled.

**Appendix D**

Feedback role play

Sarah project manager for the new super screwdriver at Black and Decker.

You have the job of your dreams. You are project manager for new products at Black and Decker. You always wanted to work in R&D and here you have been able to combine your engineering and business backgrounds. You just finished the latest project, the new super screwdriver. Your team developed this great screwdriver that figures out how much pressure to place when screwing so that the user does not have to put any effort into it. The release was yesterday and the early reports say that this is going to be a best seller.

One of the engineers in your group was particularly good during this assignment. Mitchell began working in your team 6 months ago. He came from another team very well recommended. You are very happy with his performance and were impressed by the role he played in this project.

He went above and beyond the call of duty even sleeping in the office a couple of nights in order to make sure that the product would be done on time. You think he has a lot of potential to move up the ladder in the R&D group. You are a little worried about burn out because he is so intense at work. You would like for him to learn to pace himself. You have seen it too often, brilliant engineers that focus a lot on work and then later find themselves with no life outside the office and no motivation to keep working so hard.

On the wings of the successful launch of the product you have decided to schedule a feedback session with each one of the team members. This is something that the company usually does when projects go wrong but you believe it should always be done to learn from what went right and be sure to repeat it.

Mitchell is first.

Feedback role play

Mitchell project engineer for the new super screwdriver at Black and Decker.

You have what in paper seemed like the job of your dreams. You are one of the project engineers for new products at Black and Decker. You have been working at the company for the past 5 years and have been in this particular group for 6 months. You just finished a project where you had a hand in designing a new screwdriver. This thing is so cool that it figures out how much pressure to place when screwing so that the user does not have to put any effort into it. The release was yesterday and the early reports say that this is going to be a best seller.

You like working on these projects and hope to be able to do it for a long time. You do not have much interest in moving much along the corporate ladder as you know that what you like is doing the engineering part of it and once you become a manager you no longer get to do that.

Sarah, your boss, has been in the company for many years and seems to be regarded as a very successful manager. This is the first project you have worked with her and you are not all that impressed. You thought this project was disorganized and the timeline unrealistic. You had to stay overnight twice in order to have the project done in time. You are very serious about keeping your deadlines and will do the work that is necessary but you do not like having to go to such extremes to do it. You believe that the best way is to have realistic plans and the right resources.

You do not know her well enough to know how to approach the topic, but you are worried that the next project is going to be the same thing. You just got an email requesting a meeting for feedback. You were worried since you thought that everything went well. You asked the other members of the team about it and they say that these meetings usually only happen when something goes wrong. They also tell you that everyone has received a similar email.

You are first.