

Inspiring Conversations

A CURATION OF IMPACTFUL FEEDBACK
PRACTICES & PRINCIPLES

PRINCIPLES OF FEEDBACK

Key principles derived from real life experiences and validated by research.

STORIES OF PRACTICE

Our peers and partners share their stories of effective feedback.

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Editors' Note

Hi everyone,

Here at STiR, our mission is to reignite intrinsic motivation throughout the education system and role-model the foundations of lifelong learning. The key elements that influence intrinsic motivation are having a sense of autonomy, mastery and purpose. At the heart of these 3 elements lies the process of giving and seeking high quality feedback. Feedback is a simple process of reflecting on and assessing our learning that guides our journey towards continuous improvement, enabling us to feel a sense of mastery and growth in our professional lives. When we are able to deeply reflect and decide what our improvement journey can look like, we start gaining a sense of agency and autonomy. Through all this, feedback as a process continuously reiterates and reminds us of the purpose we set out to achieve. Therefore, feedback is at the core of the work we do at STiR and something we wish to continuously explore and strengthen.

Since we work in geographies and education systems across the world, we have had the opportunity to see how great feedback works in different contexts. The principles of high quality feedback exist in varying forms, but the core remains the same everywhere. While research tells us what that core is, it does not always provide us with mental models of what the varying forms can be. This learning document is an attempt at capturing these diverse forms through the personal stories of feedback from our peers, colleagues and partners. We hope their experiences and knowledge will help others create mental models of what great feedback can look like.

Since we were creating a document on feedback, we wanted it to be informed by feedback and collaboration every step of the way. To do this, we decided early on that every decision would be taken through consultations with our peers and colleagues. From the layout design to the language within each piece, every part of this publication reflects the insightful contributions from this co-design process. When we first sent an email to announce this project, we signed off by saying #WECANNOTDOTHISWITHOUTYOU. It was wonderful to see our team members embrace this spirit of collaboration and volunteer for different roles such as Support SPOCs, authors, researchers, and designers. We sincerely want to thank each and every one involved in making this publication possible!

This learning document is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our team members and our partners in creating environments that foster high quality feedback. We hope that their voices and stories will reach others in and outside of the education sector and inspire them to create a positive learning environment for themselves and their teams.

Sincerely,
Drishya Rao & Sanya Sagar

Thank you!

Our deepest gratitude and appreciation for the following people who have contributed their time, ideas and effort to making this publication possible!



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PART 1

Principles of Effective Feedback

COMPILATION OF EVIDENCE BY ADELINE KAREN, DEXTER SAM, DRISHYA RAO & SANYA SAGAR

What is feedback and why does it matter?

Feedback is a key element towards continuous improvement and learning. It involves the provision of information about an individual's strengths and areas of improvement, addressing any misconceptions and gauging understanding. This information can be given by practitioners, peers, oneself and from learners to practitioners. Effective feedback is important for the learner to reflect on their learning, assess their progress and create a plan for further development.¹

What are the key factors that influence the process of giving high quality feedback?

We believe that high quality feedback is influenced not just by what happens in that particular conversation but also the relationship between the giver and the receiver. Therefore, we have categorised the factors into 'environmental' and 'technical':

Environmental conditions for feedback:

Trust & Safe Environment: Receiving feedback on your performance can be unnerving, which makes giving critical feedback equally hard. At the heart of a healthy exchange of feedback lies a sense of safety and trust.² Knowing that the source of feedback is a person who is invested in our growth, and recognises our effort, can make receiving critical feedback a lot easier. 'If people feel psychologically safe, they crave truth. If they feel unsafe, even the tiniest hint of disapproval can be crushing.'³

In their paper, 'The Power of Feedback',⁴ Hattie and Timperley discuss how feedback outside a learning context can feel threatening - feedback needs to be centred around improvement, it should not be used as a tool to point at a complete lack of ability or understanding. Additionally, asking permission before sharing critical feedback ("I had some thoughts on your presentation, would you like me to share them?") can help the receiver feel more in control of the conversation.

Role-modelling Culture of Improvement: Since fear of reporting failure is such a key indicator of an environment with low levels of psychological safety, how leaders present the role of failure is essential. Unless a leader expressly and actively makes it psychologically safe to do so, by actively seeking feedback for themselves, people will automatically seek to avoid failure. Failure is a source of valuable data, but leaders must understand and communicate that learning only happens when there's enough psychological safety to dig into failure's lessons carefully.

Click on the numbered citations to access the source.

Compassion: For many people feedback is a scary and fearful experience, it is often linked to judgment and criticism. Receiving and giving feedback is a deeply emotional process and therefore it becomes important to keep emotions and emotional needs at the forefront of these discussions. This is where the need to be compassionate comes in. Being compassionate during a feedback discussion is to show each other that you care for one another first, this ensures that both the receiver and the giver trust each other and don't go into a fight or flight situation. Simple actions like acknowledging emotions, talking about personal and professional contexts, asking for permission to share the feedback, and thinking of collaborative solutions are some ways you can set up a culture of compassionate feedback.⁵

Technical requirements:

Starting Positive and Celebrating: Frequent or exclusively negative feedback can often lead to people feeling deflated, defensive, or demotivated. Leibold & Schwarz, in their research, talk about the importance of striking the right balance when giving feedback - pointing out strengths as well as weaknesses. IBM's WorkTrends survey of over 19,000 workers in 26 countries revealed that employees who received recognition showed engagement levels that were three times higher than those who did not.⁶ However, broad sweeping positive statements ("You did a great job!") are often ineffective. For positive feedback to help build confidence and sustain best practices, the feedback must point at a specific action, its impact, and why it was important.⁷

Preparation: Preparation is crucial to the process of giving and receiving feedback.

There is no 'one-size fits all' approach for all feedback discussions and it therefore becomes imperative to plan and prepare for the feedback discussion in a way that is tailored to effectively supporting the individual and their context. John Hattie and Helen Timperley reiterate in the 'Power of Feedback' that "just as a good lesson depends on good planning, a powerful feedback session requires considerable forethought". Preparation can entail carefully thinking about how you want to convey your message and focus on what key points you want to highlight without overwhelming the learner. If the feedback is skewed towards improvement, it also becomes important to think about 'how they will react to the feedback and what your response might be.'⁸ While preparation can include collecting examples, identifying patterns, and getting specific about desired changes, it is also important to gauge and plan for the best time for this conversation to take place. Asking the receiver when they would like to have this discussion, it can lead to a more meaningful and deeply reflective discussion.⁹

Evidence Informed Specificity: Feedback is considered effective when it is based on clear, focused, and specific evidence rather than on opinion.¹⁰ Evidence informed specificity focuses on tangible data, examples or observations. Basing feedback on these types of evidence removes the subjectivity and links ideas to actions that can be easily understood, shifting the *focus on behaviours and actions, not on the person.*¹¹ Feedback is said to be more meaningful when it is descriptive rather than evaluative. Including concrete evidence in the feedback makes the feedback descriptive and moves away from nonspecific feedback that can be vague or based on general impressions which offer little support to the receiver.¹²

Promotion of Agency: Employees who feel their voice is heard are 4.6 times more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work.¹³ While receiving feedback can drive improvement, feeling that their voice is being heard is another key factor in setting up an organisation where people feel engaged and valued. Encouraging reflection and opening the discussion to questions helps the receiver in building their agency in the discussion. Increasingly, educators are advocating feedback systems in which the recipient plays an active role. The feedback process should also offer the receiver an opportunity to reflect on their learning. Reflection is critical to invite self assessment that communicates that feedback is not one-directional and that it is a dialogue.¹⁴

Concrete Actions & Follow Up: Feedback is considered to be constructive if the recipient feels that they have a clear idea of the path towards improvement and are able to signpost specific actions on how they will get there.¹⁵ The value of feedback can be assessed through the actions and positive behaviour changes it leads to.¹⁶ Research has also shown that effective professional development is not possible simply based on a single delivery. To truly make an improvement in practice, there needs to be an opportunity to plan, implement, and then reflect and reiterate, ideally with colleagues or a coach. Therefore, the key is to ensure there is follow-up and reflection after feedback and application of the actions discussed. The opportunity to continuously improve and adjust is vitally necessary to sustain change and embed a culture of improvement.¹⁷





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JOHN MCINTOSH

Role-modelling Culture of Improvement

Safe Environment

Like most people who have worked in a variety of organisations, my experience of feedback has been mixed. When I came to STiR, however, my line manager at the time immediately set up a really positive culture of mutual feedback. He ensured that during our weekly catch-ups, feedback was a standing item. Rather than just ensuring it was there on paper, he prepared and shared feedback for me, and also encouraged me to do the same for him. This role-modelling of the importance of feedback really helped create a safe environment in which to share.



TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

→ Be consistent in role-modelling

As a manager, invest in creating this environment over time by role modeling what you would like to see. Make others feel comfortable giving you feedback!

→ Recognise authentically

Saying thanks is not enough! People recognise authenticity through body language and tone - make sure you mean what you say.

→ Act promptly

Ensure that you are acting on the feedback that you receive. If you don't, people may not take you seriously and hesitate to share feedback with you the next time!

During my first year at STiR, I had become slightly confused as to the scope of my role versus my manager's (I was responsible for programme design, while he was responsible for overall programme delivery quality). I felt that the areas for improvement he was listing were often related to delivery rather than design, and I started to feel confused about what was expected of me. I shared this with him, and explained how I felt.

At previous organisations, such a discussion might have worried me (given I was suggesting that the feedback my manager was giving me was possibly unfair). In this case, however, I felt confident and comfortable having this discussion with him, due to the fact he had role-modelled a culture of feedback and created a safe environment. For example, he had spent considerable time and effort not just narrating the importance of feedback, but also 'living it': previously, I knew he had responded enthusiastically at the time to any feedback I had given him, but he also implemented it.

This occasion was no different. When I explained how I felt, he thanked me for sharing in a manner that was typically authentic. He did ask for specific examples, but he also made it clear that this was to help him understand so he could address it, rather than questioning where I was coming from.

At the end of the conversation, he said he would have a think about how to make our role distinctions clearer in order to help us both, and the next week he had prepared a short document outlining his thoughts on this. This further showed how he responded to and acted on feedback, thus further strengthening the culture of improvement.

JOSEPH KABANDA

Evidence Informed
Specificity

Safe Environment

In the wake of the pandemic, STiR's programme in Uganda shifted to delivering content through bi-weekly radio teacher continuous professional development sessions, and facilitating support through weekly calls to officials and bi-weekly conference calls with head teachers. David is among the District Officials who always gives specific feedback and models a culture of improvement while engaging with the Education Leader Managers (ELMs) from his district. He ensures that his discussion with any ELM is specific and yields improvement. To do this David usually asks the ELMs to share data on key program areas priori to the discussion. This piece is a feedback discussion between David and Patrick, an ELM, observed by Joseph Kabanda, Senior Programme Lead at STiR Education.*



(*Name changed for anonymity)

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

→ Find a focus

Before giving feedback, identify what is worth spending time on. What will play the biggest role in driving change? Being specific helps avoid generic conversations which make it difficult to make clear action plans.

→ Be prepared

Ensure you have studied the data, and gathered any other information you need, before going into a feedback session. Also prepare by finding out a little more about what style of feedback works best for the receiver.

→ Be kind

Be calm, empathetic and a good listener. Kindness goes a long way!

For one of their feedback sessions, David decided to focus the discussion on 'conference calls' as they were currently the most viable option for professional development due to COVID-19 pandemic. He asked Patrick to present data on level of attendance and quality of discussions in conference calls. David analysed the data presented by Patrick and narrowed down the insights to ensure that their discussion was focussed.

During the feedback session, David began by warmly welcoming Patrick, asking about his family, his life and thanking him for the resilience in supporting the continuity of learning in his district. He told Patrick that he was happy with his efforts and commitment towards the program, which could be seen in the data as well.

He then shared data that showed that some officials had consistently missed participating in conference call discussions while some put in less effort during discussions. David asked Patrick to reflect on this data and asked him to think about why the level of participation was low.

After Patrick shared his reflections, David probed further by asking questions on what exactly happened, the number of officials involved, the quality of conference discussions and how Patrick had handled the situation. After listening to Patrick's response to the questions, David then asked him to create a plan focussed on supporting the struggling officials in his district. Patrick weighed the possible options and with David's guidance and created an action plan with clear dates to support his peers.

BIJI KOCHUVEETIL PILLAI

Trust & Safe Environment

Promotion of Agency

Concrete Actions & Follow up

In this piece, I will be sharing the structure of a rewarding feedback and developmental conversation that I had with my line manager, Gunjjan Sharma, during my Developmental 1:1 (These are meetings where we reflect deeply to identify the skill areas and competencies that need to be developed by the team member to improve).

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS



Connect

A feedback conversation will be seen as rewarding if the receiver perceives the environment is safe and they share a sense of trust with the giver. Try creating a routine of connecting at a personal level with the other person, to support them to share even the most sensitive thoughts without the fear of being judged!



Give time for reflection

Share reflective questions with the receiver in advance so that they get enough time to reflect and come prepared to the discussion, it will support the receiver bring in deeper reflections and enrich the discussion!



Ask questions

Ask a lot of questions during the discussion to understand the context and the experience of the receiver instead of simply stating what works and what doesn't work. You can leverage the answers to support the receiver to decide and prioritise on actions and solutions.

Did you know that our brain influences the way we approach each conversation? According to Bungay Stanier (founder of coaching company [Box of Crayons](#)), our brain, at an unconscious level, is constantly scanning the current situation to determine whether it is safe or dangerous. Our brain asks, is this a place of risk or a place of reward? Through this piece I would like to showcase how my manager created a rewarding space to support my development!

One of the challenges that I have always faced as a District Lead is liaising with the senior district officials. My mind always scans the situation to understand whether the conversation is rewarding or risky. Usually, I get into fight/flight mode if I sense a criticism coming from district officials. Knowing this, Gunjjan makes a conscious effort to structure the Development 1:1s in a way that helps me stay open and reflective, enabling me to receive honest feedback focused on improvement.

The first question in any of our discussions is *"How are things outside of work? Any important updates that you should talk about?"*. This routine has made me feel like there is a safe environment in these meetings where I can openly share my feelings and worries. The most important thing for me is to be able to trust so that I can share my challenges without the fear of being judged.

I trust Gunjjan immensely because he does not give or take any feedback or make any comments based on assumptions but rather he relies on facts and observations. For example, when I have called Gunjjan after a meeting with a high ranking official and said, *"The conversation didn't go well!"*, instead of reacting instantly, he has asked me to go over the conversation, so that we could reflect on what went well, what could have been better, and ways I can improve the next time.

At least a week before these meetings, Gunjjan shares some questions with me, giving me enough time to reflect and come prepared to the meeting. The questions are very reflective and encourage me to think deeply. Some of the questions and responses are given below taken from my developmental 1:1 with an example of my response ;

- *What skills do you want to learn?*
 - *Pitching ideas*
- *What problems do you want to solve regarding this?*
 - *I struggle a lot in pitching ideas to senior authority like my DIET principal*
- *Possible reasons for these problems?*
 - *Talking about behaviour change and non-empirical data*
 - *Tailoring the narrative to a district level*
 - *BRPS - Skills and behaviour change*
 - *Feel too young/ inexperienced to speak with people*
 - *What we are doing – link it to intrinsic motivation*

During the meeting, we go through the notes and he asks me to elaborate further on what has been written. He then gives me feedback on my thoughts based on its alignment with my work and if spending time to work on this skill will actually help the program and my stakeholders.

Next, we discuss what problems or areas of improvement I would want to work on and why . Here, he encourages me to list down all the problems related to skill that I feel I need to work upon. Then he supports me to choose the ones that are most relevant and which can be worked on immediately. In order to arrive at the action items related to these improvement areas, he asks me to think about a person who demonstrates that skill very well and why I think so. Then he asks me to articulate what I have learnt by observing this person and what I can start applying with my stakeholders. To ensure that I plan these actions well and think about the follow up, he gives me the following questions to structure my thoughts, which we discuss and agree during the meeting:

- *What will success look like for you?*
- *What will be your timeline?*
- *What can I do to support you?*
- *What will teammates do in order to support?*

Finally, we build a consensus on the actions that I can take care of myself, actions that I would need his support on and actions that I would require team members to support me with. We also simultaneously schedule a follow-up meeting to review the progress of the action items.

"The questions are very reflective and encourage me to think deeply."



SWARNALI DAS

Recognizing and Celebrating

Promotion of Agency

Safe Environment

Rama* facilitated a teacher network meeting (an opportunity for teachers from the same school to come together and discuss challenges, best practices, and pedagogical tools) as part of the Teacher Development Coordinator Programme in Delhi. As Rama's academic mentor, Madhavan* observed the network meeting and then met with Rama to provide feedback. Also present on the call was Alpna Chaterjee, a district official who wanted to observe Madhavan's work as a mentor.

(*Names changed for anonymity)

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

→ Start with the positives

Set a positive tone to the feedback discussion by recognising and acknowledging the effort of the other person. Use the opportunity to include specific examples of what you think went well, that can strengthen the appreciation!

→ Reframe to motivate

Often the receiver of the feedback can take a very critical lens while reflecting on the experience. You can reframe questions that lead to an in-depth reflection on what went well and identify strengths that can be leveraged to create solutions!

→ Body language & tone

Listen attentively, use a respectful and supportive tone and keep a pleasant expression on your face, these are simple ways to use your tone and body language to create a safe space that supports the other person to stay open to suggestions!

Alpna's objective for this observation was very clear in wanting to observe Rama's facilitation skill and content clarity and how Madhavan had supported Rama for the same. During the observation, Alpna identified that although Rama was clear with the content and flow of the session, she faced challenges in facilitating the meeting and probing participants. She noticed that Madhavan, who was very clear about the meeting objectives and had established a good connection with the teachers, intervened throughout the meeting and facilitated the same successfully.

Post the observation, Alpna had a reflective discussion with Madhavan on the agreed objectives. She started the discussion by appreciating Madhavan for taking ownership, co-facilitating the meeting to support Rama, and acknowledging his ability to connect with and engage teachers. She also acknowledged Rama's improvement in facilitation and planning compared to the previous meeting.

On getting an opportunity to share his own reflections, while Madhavan highlighted the improvements he had seen, he kept going back to the fact that Rama was still not facilitating as expected. He shared that he was tired with the failures despite his efforts and persistent challenges with Rama. Noticing that Madhavan was only focussing on what was not going well, Alpna started nudging him to reflect on the positive changes instead. She asked *"Has there been a gradual improvement in her facilitation skill? How was this improvement possible? What did you do to make these positive changes happen?"*

Through these questions, she tried to support Madhavan to reflect on his strengths. She went on to say, *"Your reflections show that you are deeply concerned with the quality of the meetings and engaged in supporting Rama. Your ability to connect with Rama and the teachers and openness to reach out to us for support demonstrates your growth mindset and ownership to bring change."*

Keeping Madhavan's strengths in mind, Alpna suggested that he leverage his strengths to create improvement. For example, she suggested, *"Your sessions are well planned, well timed and interactive. Would you like to choose any one of these areas of facilitation where you can support Rama to improve?"* After each question, she gave Madhavan some space to think and share his views on her suggestions. This helped Madhavan shift from blaming himself for not giving adequate support to focussing on the processes and different possible solutions.

Together they created a specific action plan. Alpna ended the meeting by asking Madhavan for feedback on ways she could improve and what she could do to support him further*.

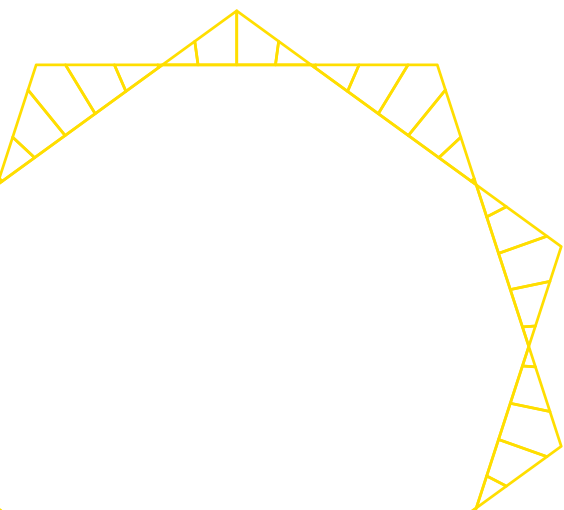
What stood out was Alpna's body language and tone, which was non-judgmental, empathetic and supportive. She listened attentively with a pleasant expression on her face. Her tone was respectful, she would nod at times, and say, *"Hmm, Yes Sir, I can understand."* *"No Sir, please don't think that you could not."* *"I can see changes which reflect your efforts."* *"I know that there are multiple challenges and we do not have concrete solutions."* Even though these actions and behaviours may seem small and almost insignificant, they played a key role in creating an environment that supported growth and reflection!

EDITOR'S NOTE*

Notice how Alpna also seeks feedback around her development, thereby role modelling a growth mindset and a culture of openness. These small actions can go a long way in building a positive culture of improvement!



Alpna engaged in a feedback discussion



SR. PATRICIA ABWOOLI AKIISA

Coordinated by Donarm Ninsiima (Senior Programme Lead, STiR Education)

Developing Trust

Preparation



Sr. Patricia Abwooli Akiisa is a District Leader in Uganda who works with Education Leaders (EL). This piece describes her journey to understanding feedback and her feedback discussion with Mr. Kiiza, a teacher.

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS



Prepare

Before the feedback session, prepare! Identify the positive that you want to highlight and also 1 or 2 key areas that can drive improvement.



Create opportunities for autonomy

Let the receiver of feedback decide their action steps - give them time and space to reflect on what they would like to change and how. Giving them this autonomy will increase their motivation to actually follow through!



Get feedback on feedback

Always get feedback on your own feedback! There is room to grow for everyone.

My personal journey with feedback in my professional development was intermittent, however, I realized by looking back that wherever feedback had been given, it had led to my professional growth. For me, change occurred with developmental feedback from people in leadership and friends who got me to reflect on all the different ways in which I could move towards the my goals.

At first, while receiving feedback, I always felt the giver of the feedback was only out to find mistakes, but this mindset of questioning intentions led me to missing out on opportunities for change. Once I became a District Leader, through the STiR programme, I understood how to give 'Focused Feedback' and made it a point to share feedback for all the trainings we conducted in the district. This helped make the feedback process so ordinary and normal, we started asking these questions ourselves! *"What went well? What could have been done differently?"* Feedback became a way to drive change and improvement.

In our sessions and coaching calls, we discussed some key points to keep in mind while giving feedback. Two of these that I thought most important were to develop trust by creating a safe space for people to share and reflect, and also start by celebrating all the small changes that the person had been able to drive. We also discussed how it is best to limit feedback to 1 or 2 key areas for improvement. Keeping these principles in mind, I tried incorporating them when I had to give feedback to a teacher. In particular, I worked on developing a pleasant manner and giving positive recognition.

"Mr. Kiiza, I have liked your way of calling on the students in class and making them feel valued. I am impressed by how you implemented most of the agreed changes in the previous lesson. It is nice to see you enjoy your teaching. I am really happy for you.

*We shall keep this session to the point because I am aware you also have many other engagements. I understand the week has had a number of challenges, besides I also don't have answers to some issues, so, I am open to suggestions or questions as we dialogue.**

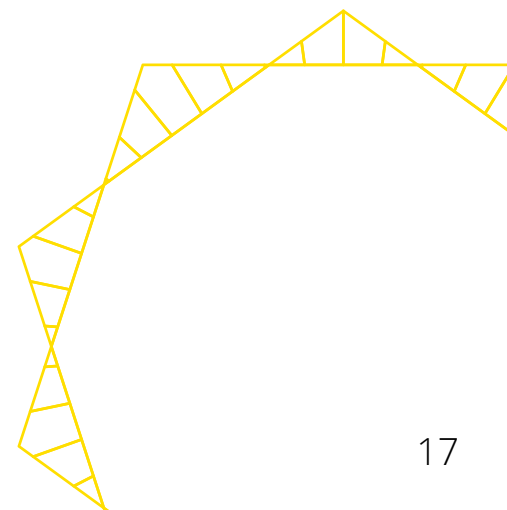
Could we focus on one key point today to make it easier to set actions and follow up time?

Now you are free to share what you felt went well. You can follow it up with what you feel you could do differently next time."

Mr. Kiiza shared happily that he would try class grouping and breaking down learning further. He asked me to follow up on this in the next lesson. To establish this culture of feedback more strongly, I even went ahead and asked for feedback on this particular feedback session! As a leader, I learned how to guide and improve my session with him next time. This culture of feedback has made observations user friendly and peaceful. One has to prepare and be mindful of the emotional, physical, interactive, proactive language and positive professional building of the receiver and giver.

EDITOR'S NOTE*

Notice how Sr. Patricia shows humility here by saying, "I also don't have answers to some issues". Being open to learning from each other helps establish a relationship of trust and helps the receiver of feedback feel valued and comfortable.



GOPALA KRISHNA

Promotion of Agency

Safe & Positive Environment

In my experience interacting with Education Leader Managers (ELM), I have clearly observed that feedback is either in the format of “Disconnect, Connect, Disconnect” or Sandwich feedback (Area of improvement, something positive, and ending with another area of improvement). Most of the time, this style of giving feedback does not end up with the creation of a positive environment nor with clear action plans. After some of STiR’s interventions in the district, the methodology of the giving feedback has transformed a lot. The process of giving and receiving feedback is more positively structured and documented. It has also played a crucial step towards professional development and mastery among officials. In 2019, I went on a classroom observation with Kusuma (Education Leader Manager) and Ravi (Education Leader) in Mysuru.*

(*Names changed for anonymity)

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS



Create space for self reflection!

Before launching into your observations and findings, it is important to give the receiver the chance to reflect on their experience first, that way emphasising on the importance of their reflection and insights in the developmental conversation.



Have a Clear Rationale

Listen carefully and suggest solutions with a clear rationale. Take some time to note down the challenges and ask questions to deeply understand where the challenge is stemming from. This will support in creating a positive, solution oriented environment!

Just before the classroom observations started, the teacher shared her lesson plans with Kusuma and Ravi. She requested that both of them observe and give her developmental feedback.

During the observation, Kusuma was taking notes using a template STiR had provided and Ravi was taking notes in his personal diary. After the observation was done, Ravi was the first to give feedback and used the “Disconnect, Connect and Disconnect” method. He started giving negative feedback to the teacher by identifying the mistakes they had made. I personally felt that this feedback led to a negative atmosphere in the room.

After a few minutes, Kusuma asked the teacher to reflect on the class she taught. She gave the teacher a structured way to think and reflect: *2 positives, 1 area of improvement, any challenges and support required from Kusuma or Ravi.*

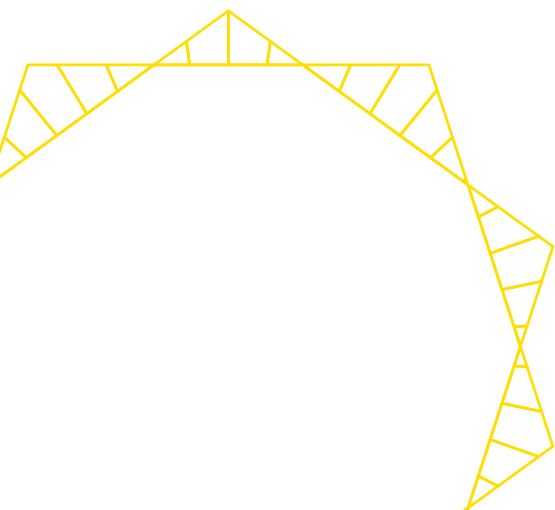
After the teacher highlighted some areas that were positive and other areas of improvements, Kusuma thanked her for reflecting and then shared all the positive highlights that she had noted down. She shared some of the areas of improvements which included checking for understanding in the children using a couple of strategies that had been introduced through the programme. Kusuma explained the purpose and importance of each strategy and helped the teacher create a plan to apply her learnings. Kusuma was honest with the teacher, but role modelled compassionate candor by being gentle and clear in her feedback.

The teacher was overwhelmed and thanked Kusuma for the high quality of feedback. Ravi also appreciated Kusuma for demonstrating what great feedback looks like.

The teacher, with Kusuma and Ravi's support, mutually agreed to create an action plan based on the feedback. The action plan consisted of (a) next date of observation, (b) who will be an observer, (c) one thing the teacher did well, (d) one thing the teacher needs to improve, (e) what thing the teacher will do differently next time based on the feedback and reflection and (f) any support required from Kusuma and Ravi.

When leaving the classroom, Kusuma thanked the teacher for her participation in the training and for her willingness to be observed as it played a vital role in giving feedback and improving her professional development.

"She gave the teacher a structured way to think and reflect: 2 positives, 1 area of improvement, any challenges and support required from Kusuma or Ravi."



RINA D'SOUZA

Empathy

Trust & Safe Environment

Having worked in many organisations and received feedback in different forms, it was a very different experience at STiR to have feedback, first of all, be such an important part of the process. Secondly, it was not just being given feedback from your manager but a collation of 360 feedback from team members across the organisation to give you a holistic view of how things are going. The most encouraging part has been the way in which feedback is focused on improvement and continuing to track that improvement diligently. In many ways, I can draw a parallel to how therapy works - you work out what the problems are and then work on finding ways forward to address the problem, not letting the problem be a barrier to achieving what you set out to achieve.

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS



Look back!

Create a space with your manager/manager to regularly look at previously discussed feedback, review and follow-up on areas of improvement!



Space to ask questions

Set aside time with your managers to discuss ways of working, creating a space to ask questions. This will be a first step in the direction of building trust. Even with team members who have worked together for a while, it is a good exercise to take a step back from every day work and discuss this!



Understand context

While building trust is immensely important, sometimes we are required to give feedback to those we haven't had the chance to interact with much. In such cases, take the time to understand the person's context, constraints, strengths, and challenges; and use that understanding to frame your feedback.

I am generally a straight talking person, not pulling any punches most of the time. Since it didn't affect my previous roles, I brought that style into STiR as well. This came out in the first 360 feedback for me.

The points I would like to highlight about how this feedback was given are based primarily on trust and a safe environment that was created between my manager and me. He did this from the beginning by encouraging me to share my opinions, thoughts, doubts, and questions without a fear of judgment or 'retribution'. I was always told no question was too small. There was always an element of empathy, which became a mutual shared understanding. In openly sharing his views and thoughts and often having healthy debates on various topics, he helped me really believe in his intentions and empathy. This set the context for when the first round of feedback had to be given to me - this was a combination of his own observations coupled with the 360 from the team.

While there was a nervousness before the feedback was to be shared, the way that he laid out the feedback showed that he understood who I am and my intentions - a clear outcome of the trust in the relationship that had been built. For example, around the feedback about my "a little too direct" approach in dealing with people, he didn't make it seem that my nature/manner was wrong. Rather, he framed the feedback to say that my direct way of speaking is very useful and refreshing and something I should keep going, but asked me to reflect on whether there was a way I could tailor this to the listener*. So there wasn't a condemnation of my intrinsic behaviour, just an expectation to adapt it depending on the audience.

This was especially important in the context of the specific piece of feedback that I have mentioned above. Rather than just calling it out as negative, he asked me to channelise it. He worked with me to help me understand how and when to say what I want to say. Not to say he was prescriptive, not at all, but he just got me to think about specific areas of focus in terms of way forward. This is where the element of compassion comes in very strongly.

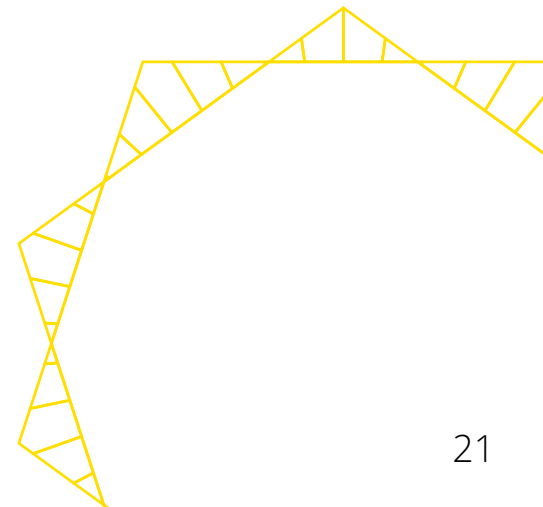
What also helped was for this to be regularly discussed and tracked over time. We used the Developmental 1:1 meetings to track and discuss this. This way it didn't exist in a vacuum and ensured that the feedback was a living, breathing part of me, constantly pushing me to improve. Each developmental catch up usually discussed ongoing issues that I was working on along with anything new that came up and it was regularly scheduled for every 6 weeks. It was encouraging as it pushed me to keep improving and also immensely helped me in my work, which is strongly based on relationships.

"In openly sharing his views and thoughts and often having healthy debates on various topics, he helped me really believe in his intentions and empathy"



EDITOR'S NOTE*

Notice here how Rina's manager took a challenge and reframed it in a way that validated her positive self-image. He recognised that this was an integral part of who she was and, instead of asking her to change it, he merely got her to reflect on how she might make small tweaks to help others feel more comfortable when receiving feedback from her. Small, thoughtful acts such as these help establish open and honest working relationships.



ANNET NANTABA

Evidence Based Feedback

Empathy

My journey of understanding the importance and context of deliberate feedback all started in December 2017 as I joined STiR Education. I joined at a time when the organisation had put together a bootcamp where the team was discussing the theme and work plan for the next year: “ Re-ignite and Inspire”. During the entire camp, colleagues kept giving each other feedback for improvement, and I realised I had been missing this as part of information about and within myself. From that day, I made it a deliberate effort to learn, practice and improve giving and receiving feedback. The major point was to make feedback part and parcel of my day to day life, especially if I wanted to improve.

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS



Make it a habit

Reach out and ask for feedback every opportunity you get. This will not only help you improve, it will help create a larger culture of feedback in your team.



Write!

Noting down behaviours and actions that support your observations make for great evidence and make the conversation more objective.



Start with curiosity**

Start with curiosity about the evidence you shared. While you may perceive a particular action as something that requires attention, the other person may have their reasons for doing it. Ask them questions to understand their context and thought process!

Over the years, while working with STiR Education, I realised that for feedback to be part of day to day life, I had to identify the areas that needed improvement. I did this by requesting feedback from my colleagues and line manager on how I was doing. I noted that it was very hard for me to accept the feedback they kept giving me because they did not apply the principle for evidence in feedback. For example, I once received feedback from my line manager that I was always quiet and not engaging in meetings. While this was important feedback, I didn't end up focusing on it because my manager did not cite any evidence. I believed that I was fully engaging; and so didn't see any reason to change.*

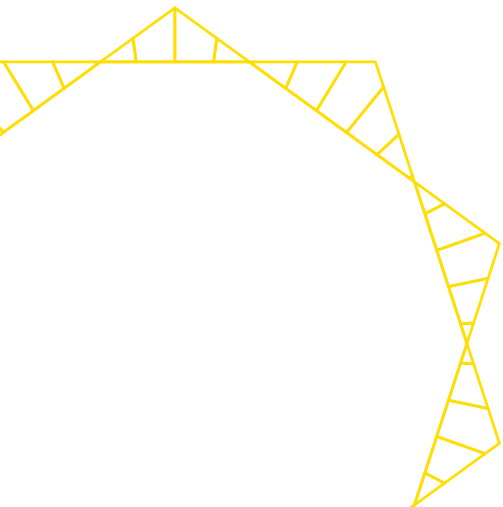
Over time, instances like these, helped me realize the importance of having evidence in giving developmental feedback. I started embedding evidence while giving feedback, especially to my colleagues and stakeholders that I work with. During routine activities in the field, I made it a point to conduct feedback meetings at the end of each activity. I encouraged and supported stakeholders to identify what they have done well, areas that needed improvement with actual evidence; and I challenged them to come up with actions of how they would improve. A case in point is when I facilitated a feedback session with the ELM from Kamuli District. She had facilitated an EL training on emotional support for learners. During the session, she stated only areas she had done well in. However, I had made a note of some areas that required improvement, such as probing and using examples, and used my observations to share those areas of improvements with her. The evidence, in the form of the notes I had taken during the training, made it easier for her to accept the feedback and incorporate it in her action plan.

Over time, I have also learnt that basing feedback on evidence allows the giver of feedback to ask relevant questions that will support improvement. For example, "I noticed that when the teacher said she did not think the strategy would work, there was an opportunity to probe deeper and ask why. Do you think that would have been helpful?" These questions help the giver understand the other person's context better and be more empathetic, which makes the process of feedback stronger. I have been working on transferring this skill to my stakeholders, encouraging them to always note down evidence of improvement and asking relevant questions. I am very proud to note that they can now easily accept developmental feedback from their colleagues because it is always backed up by evidence.

EDITOR'S NOTE*

**Evidence is not always just numbers. In this situation, observations of the individual's interactions with others during meetings might have made for some good evidence. For example, "Annet, I noticed that in the past 3 meetings, you have only shared your thoughts once or twice. Do you feel that is an accurate observation?" If the person agrees, ask more questions to understand their context, feelings, and thoughts. Once you have discussed how the person feels about this observation/evidence, let them know why you think it is important to address and get their inputs on how they can move forward - "Both those times, your thoughts were very helpful in taking the conversation forward. I'd love to hear your thoughts more often. What support do you feel you might need to do that?" Remember, the person receiving the feedback may not think the identified problem is a problem at all - so start with curiosity. Share your observations, find out what they feel about it, and take it from there!*

*** Watch Liz Lerman talk about the importance of curiosity when giving feedback in this BBC video [here](#).*



REINIER TERWINDT

Trust & Safe Environment

Honesty



Over the past years, I've had a very constructive working relationship with my line manager in which two-way feedback has become increasingly normalized. Reflecting upon this relationship, the two deciding factors that helped me to feel comfortable with giving and receiving feedback were trust between us and the safe environment that we created together. We developed a relationship over the years. We cared about each other not just as colleagues, but as individuals. That sense of relationship helped me to trust that he was always looking out for me, even when we disagreed.

About two years ago, I noticed there was a tension between me and my line manager about our M&E strategy. We simply wanted to go in different directions and I struggled to understand his point of view. I found it difficult to clearly state why I felt the way I did and it felt like we were stuck. When we saw each other in person a week later, we both knew there was an elephant in the room we had to discuss. Instead of diving straight into it though, we decided to go out for dinner. That night, we didn't talk about work but instead asked each other about our lives, about what we're up to, we laughed about fun memories we had together, and that dinner made both of us feel at ease*. I was reminded that we genuinely care about each other as people. Suddenly, that M&E strategy felt much easier to discuss, which is exactly what we did the next morning.

That morning, I noticed that we both felt more at ease. What had changed? We stopped being focused on trying to be right, and instead we deeply listened to each other. He started the meeting by saying, "tell me what you're most worried about in terms of our M&E strategy and why," which made me feel like he wanted to understand my concerns. We asked each other questions. And we were empathetic of each other's points of view. We embraced the tension that existed between us and didn't dance around the issue we had to resolve.

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

➔ Build human relationships

Create opportunities where you spend time with the other person. It shows that you care for them beyond just the work at hand, and will help build stronger relationships that lead to easier and more trusting feedback conversations!

➔ Role model trust

Listen deeply, be honest and empathetic during difficult conversations, it provides a sense of trust.

➔ Address the tension

Don't dance around the tension, instead address it in an open and trusting manner. Talk about the elephant in the room, it will not only showcase openness to solving the issue but will also help you address it sooner rather than later!

We were both honest with each other, and we finally realized exactly where the tension between us was. He mentioned, *“let’s remember that it’s not about who is right or who is wrong, but how we can best ensure our M&E strategy helps us improve as an organisation,”* which helped me to step back and prioritize the organisation over my specific perspective on our strategy.

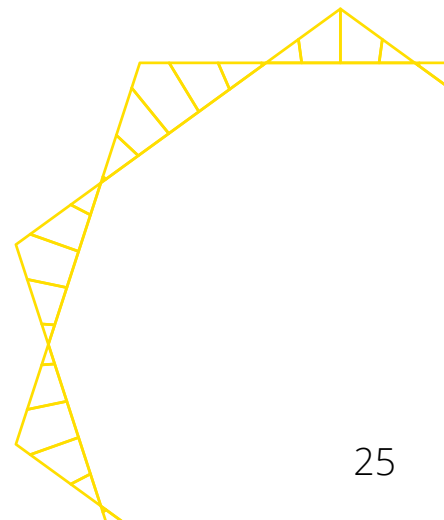
I realized that we operate in an imperfect world where we can’t both have what we want. When he said, *“Rein, it sounds like what you’re really worried about is to ensure our M&E strategy remains flexible and iterative, even if we need to work within the boundaries of what’s considered as rigorous in evaluation by the funder community,”* it made me feel that he acknowledged my point.

Suddenly, his point of view made total sense to me as I became more emphatic of the pressures that he faced. We left that meeting with a revised M&E strategy that we both felt confident in. I might not have gotten everything that I wanted when I went into that meeting, but that wasn’t the point. I left that meeting with a better understanding of where he was coming from, and our ability to be honest with each other, respect each other, and to be open about our disagreements left us with a better strategy in the end.

"I left that meeting with a better understanding of where he was coming from, and our ability to be honest with each other, respect each other, and to be open about our disagreements left us with a better strategy in the end."

EDITOR'S NOTE

Feedback can be a daunting task not just for the receiver but for the giver as well. Creating opportunities to build a relationship around each other as people rather than simply as colleagues can help both the receiver and the giver to give honest feedback without discomfort or fear!



DORIS NABUGASHA

Evidence Based Specificity

Concrete Action Plans
and Follow Up

This piece is a feedback experience shared between Jane, a District Inspector of Schools and Emmanuel*, a Education Leader Manager, observed by the author (STiR Senior Programme Lead, Doris Nabugasha) following a District Alignment Meeting (meeting where officials look at data as part of a progress check).*



(*Names changed for anonymity)

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

→ Use data for reflection

Promote self reflection based on evidence as it will help create an environment for objective and critical thinking during developmental conversations.

→ Take action

If you are a giver of feedback, make sure you are proactive in your follow up and show it in action, it will highlight your intention in supporting the other in their developmental journey!

→ Acknowledge action

Feedback doesn't end with just a follow up. To create a culture of improvement, you have to appreciate and recognise efforts taken by the receiver to work on the feedback given and create opportunities for further development and mastery!

During one of our District Alignment Meetings, it was discussed that Iganga District had made positive improvement in implementing the program but the data showed that one particular Education Leader Manager, Emmanuel, was having challenges in his area of operation. The data indicated that 12 schools had conducted Network Meeting 1, 10 schools had conducted Network Meetings 1 and 2 and 20 schools had not conducted any meetings. In the previous months, effective feedback sessions had been making rounds through the STiR training, so it was no wonder that the District Inspector of Schools, Jane, asked for a separate meeting with Emmanuel to try and identify the challenges that he was facing.

In the private meeting, which I (the author) was invited to, I observed that the feedback interaction between Jane and Emmanuel based on the data discussed in the alignment meeting. Jane noted that there were a huge number of schools that were not holding Network Meetings as expected and this directly affected not only the overall performance of the district in implementing the program but also the quality of teaching in the classroom. She explained this kind of performance meant that the teachers would not be able to learn and practice the strategies that could help them improve their classroom pedagogy.

After sharing this, Jane gave Emmanuel an opportunity to reflect on the data and share what he thought about the data collected, what impressed him and what needed to be improved. After reflecting, Emmanuel opened up and shared some of the challenges he had been having with most of the School Education Leaders (SELs), like high absenteeism rates of the SELs at school, the few in schools were doing other administrative work and so on. On hearing this, Jane asked him to come up with the support he needed from the district officials.

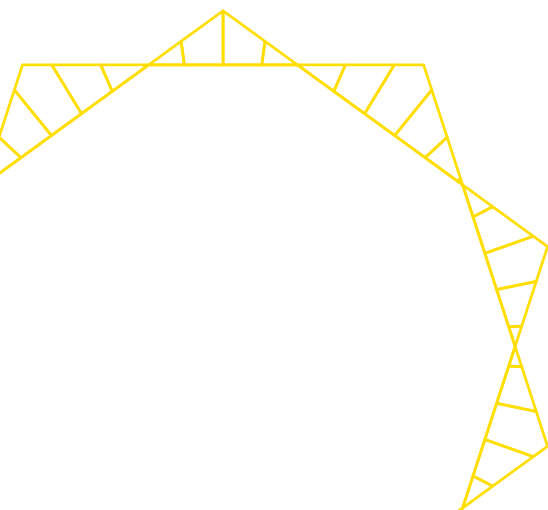
Motivated by the need to see an improvement in the general implementation of the program because of its effect on the quality of teaching and overall performance at national exams, Emmanuel requested for the district officials to have a separate meeting with the struggling SELs and have them commit to reform. He also asked Jane to have the district officials come with him to the field during support visits to schools and collectively support schools to implement according to the timelines that they share. It was interesting to see that Jane did not impose her ideas of what should be done but rather gave Emmanuel an opportunity to think about solutions.

After Emmanuel shared his action points, Jane committed to send an official invitation to the struggling Headteachers to a meeting with other officials. She followed through by conducting this meeting, in which she highlighted the overall purpose of the STiR program and she noted that the data showed that the schools invited were having challenges in implementing at school level. She then invited Headteachers to reflect on the data presented to them and to share their highlights, struggling areas and an action plan. From this meeting, one of the agreed actions plans between Emmanuel and the Headteachers was to start doing clustered Network Meetings because these would give the Headteacher an opportunity to share roles and learn from each other as they handle different aspects of the meetings.

Jane took the initiative to continuously check in with Emmanuel and the Headteachers about the planned upcoming meetings and offered to support the schools and Emmanuel as the need arose. For the first time in Buweira coordinating center in Iganga District, we had clustered network meetings happening, classroom observations happening and frequent visits from officials to support program implementation and improvement in teaching on the overall!

After seeing that Emmanuel had made strides to support the SELs in his area of operation, Jane recognised his work and later involved him in more official activities because she was confident that he would be able to support the SELs attached to him.

"It was interesting to see that Jane did not impose her ideas of what should be done but rather gave Emmanuel an opportunity to think about solutions."



KARTHIGEYAN ANANDARAJ

Culture of Improvement

Self-Image

Follow Up

In my work with different organizations, I was acquainted with the idea of giving feedback for someone's personal development. However, it is in my work here at STiR Education in the last couple of years, that I have discovered a really powerful and often ignored dimension of feedback - the value of seeking feedback. One of the ways I decided to go about this was by trying to role model this with my district stakeholders.

TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

→ Be honest about your own limitations

One way to build a safe environment that supports honest feedback conversations is to be honest from the get go. Try and honestly share your limitations, challenges and biases, it will help the other person feel it is okay to be vulnerable and honest in return.

→ Seek feedback

If you want to develop a relationship based on trust and improvement, ask for feedback. Be specific about what you seek and make it a habit. Soon you will be role modelling a culture of improvement that can be quite infectious!

From the first day, when I introduced myself and the program, I was very candid about my own and the team's experiences and strengths. I was also transparent about our limitations and what we are yet to learn. I acknowledged their enormous experience as district leaders in education, and our need to learn from them. This set the foundation for my district leaders proactively taking the onus to ensure I accurately understand the realities of the education system. This also made it natural for me to periodically check if they were tracking the goals of our program and share additional perspectives. This mutual sharing created an environment of trust, and we started listening to each other and felt safe to share openly.

I believe that if you want someone to accept your comments or feedback, you should first show them that you are willing to accept theirs! So, instead of rushing to give them feedback at the beginning of the relationship, I started with seeking feedback from them. I asked and probed them for specific feedback after every activity. If I have observed a classroom with a district leader or if one of them were present at an institute even for a short time, I made it a point to wait and meet them in person to get their immediate thoughts and suggestions.

In my first district, after our very first Institute with block-level education officials, I sought the feedback of a district leader, Ms. Kumudha. Initially, she gave me positive feedback appreciating how I had calmly played the role of a co-facilitator. While she appreciated my facilitation, she pointed out spelling errors that she spotted in our handbook. When we were in the planning discussion for another training, she showed me her copy of the handbook where she had highlighted the Tamil spelling errors. "Educators and officials will easily spot these mistakes", she said and requested for it to be avoided in the next handbook.

I appreciated her for taking the time to identify these errors. I also acknowledged and thanked her for the feedback, and as a team, we immediately made changes based on this feedback. I also transparently shared with her gaps in the process of translation, highlighting our struggle to find a good translator. She offered her support to proofread our content for spelling errors, before it reaches the education officials and the teachers.

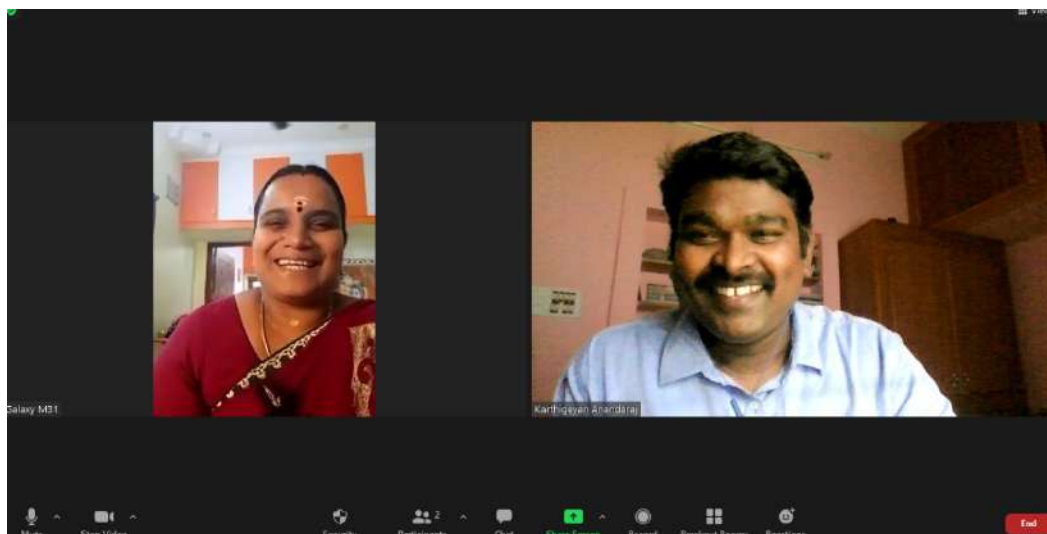
This entire incident made her feel confident about sharing more feedback with me. It also made her empathetic towards our limitations, and she was able to appreciate the progress we made in this area in the coming months! After a few weeks, when Ms. Kumudha completed facilitating her first session, with me observing, she immediately sought my feedback!

I have found that seeking feedback embodies our organizational values of humility and openness, and it unleashes ownership like nothing else. It encourages others to themselves seek, give and receive feedback. This dynamic has helped me create healthy partnerships with my district stakeholders and I have seen my district officials thrive and take up increasing levels of ownership in the programme.

With the recent pandemic, I thought building such a relationship with stakeholders virtually is going to be challenging if not impossible! In one of the new districts, right after the initial orientation, the district leader, Ramesh*, called me and expressed his reservations and doubts about the working of the program. I listened, probed for gaps in his knowledge. I sought his specific feedback for how we can help him better understand the program. In the very next week, we planned another orientation incorporating this specific feedback. Seeing that I had sought and incorporated his feedback, Mr. Ramesh started actively engaging in the implementation and contextualizing of the program. He brought in various ideas into the facilitation to further engage block officials. He also felt safe to share challenges he was facing with respect to technology. With some support from me, today, we see that he is one of our most inspiring district leaders. Now, powered by his own personal example, he is able to inspire many in his district towards building a culture of feedback, improvement and lifelong learning!

(*Names changed for anonymity)

"I have found that seeking feedback unleashes ownership like nothing else. It encourages others to themselves seek, give and receive feedback."



TUSHAR PUNDIR

Tools to Support
Evidence-Based Feedback

Mr. Sanjay Tripathi has been the Education Leader Manager and District Coordinator for 3 districts in Delhi. He has been supporting the Mentor Teachers in these districts since the inception of the program. In trying to improve his support to the Mentor Teachers, Mr. Tripathi has made many efforts to improve the process of giving and receiving feedback, and this think piece highlights one of many. Tushar Pundir is a Senior Programme Manager at STiR Education, who works closely with Mr. Tripathi.



TIPS & TAKEAWAYS



Keep patience

The pillars of effective feedback take time to establish, give yourself that time!



Find alternatives

While you work on establishing these pillars, find other ways through which you can gather and give feedback.

We often talk about 'Evidence-Based Feedback'. However, in order to have evidence upon which to base feedback, there have to be opportunities to capture that evidence. This may come in the form of observations or quantitative data. While Mr. Sanjay Tripathi knew that there were a significant number of schools that were struggling to plan and complete their Teacher Network Meetings, he had no way to give the Education Leaders (ELs) of those schools feedback on how they could improve. This was because schools weren't sharing the dates on which they planned to conduct the meetings. So, there was hardly ever an opportunity to observe meetings or follow up with those who were not being able to conduct them.

Knowing that observations played a hugely important role in developing a culture of developmental feedback, Mr. Sanjay Tripathi along with the Programme Managers who supported him (Mr. Shadab Ahmed and Ms. Uditia Tiwari from STiR Education), developed a simple tool - a Google Spreadsheet in which all ELMs would enter the tentative date for their schools' Teacher Network Meetings. This was a living document that was shared amongst all the relevant district stakeholders that allowed individuals to schedule their observations. When this action planning sheet was introduced, there was a slight hesitation about whether it would be used to track and monitor. Mr. Sanjay Tripathi ensured that he communicated the utility of this sheet to his ELMs and ELs (it was only to help plan and share) and politely requested them to give it a try.

People gradually embraced the planning sheet and observations followed by developmental feedback began to increase, however, they still hesitated in openly sharing their challenges or the support they required. 'Establishing Trust', another important pillar of effective feedback practices, is integral but takes time - time that Mr. Tripathi and the PMs had not yet spent with the ELMs and ELs. They wondered what they could do in the meantime to make everyone feel more comfortable sharing what they needed from Mr. Tripathi, the Programme Managers, and the DIET faculty. In the planning sheet itself, they simply added a column called 'Support Required'. The sheet was an effective way to get feedback from the ELMs and ELs on how they could be supported in a better way. This column in the sheet played a big role in strengthening the culture of feedback until the ELMs and ELs felt comfortable sharing them directly in their conversations.

Relationships that nurture effective feedback take time and effort. But that does not mean that we cannot find ways in the interim to ensure that useful feedback is shared and implemented.

PERWINDER SINGH

Promotion of Agency

Since I joined STiR, I have been learning a lot about feedback and its impact on people. I have learnt that it is important to adapt and contextualise the way one gives feedback based on the receiver's context and situation. In this think piece I highlight another important aspect of a feedback conversation, creating an opportunity for the receiver to voice their expectations and provide solutions for the challenges raised.

I used to think that the best way to create a safe environment that allows for honest feedback was to have a 'hard feedback talk', where I would give space for my colleague and I to share our frustrations or anything that was bothering us. It was not easy to have this talk, but I felt it would lead to us having an open conversation. However, while we were able to have this discussion, it did not lead to any change for either of us.

I decided that I would take a different approach to understand what was going on. I set up a consultative meeting with my colleague and this time around I asked him how he wanted to resolve this and what he was expecting from me in these feedback discussions. As a result of this conversation, I made some changes in the way I structured these meetings with my colleague but also how to create a positive environment outside of the meeting.

Within the meetings, I started recognising his work more, I made sure that he had a space to ask questions and I started including a 15 minute slot at the end of the meeting to talk about any issues he was facing professionally that I could support him on as well as any personal issues he wanted to share. Another idea that I tried was to ask his advice on the issues I was facing in my work or role, I found that he became very curious to understand more and enjoyed giving his ideas and thoughts to solve them. Beyond the meeting, I also asked him to join me in other meetings that included conversations beyond our team's work, which I felt will help build transparency of what was happening in the organisation and between other functions.

Through this experience I have realised that it is not always necessary as a manager to always drive the structure, agenda or the solutions of these feedback conversations. I think as a manager my role should be one of facilitation, where the autonomy to set the expectations, the structure and co-create solutions lies with the receiver!



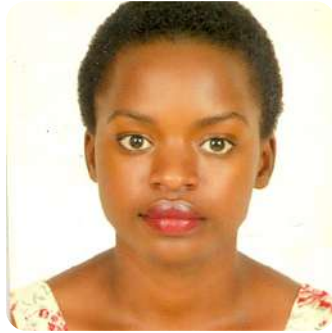
TIPS & TAKEAWAYS

➔ Promote agency and autonomy

Ask your colleague what they expect out of the meeting and support them in thinking about the change they would like to see.

➔ Show vulnerability

Share your challenges and issues with your colleague, and ask for solutions, encourage a two way conversation!



Thank you

