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Why I Think That Giving and Receiving Feedback Is both Destructive and Immoral

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Jerry B. Harvey: The George Washington University

I am convinced that giving and receiving feedback is destructive to both the givers and the receivers, unless of course, the givers and receivers happen to be air-conditioning systems or other types of inanimate contrivances that need to be mechanically adjusted from time to time. In fact, every time people ask me, "Do you want me to give you some feedback?" the urge to puke on them is nearly overwhelming because the last time I checked, I found that I am neither an inanimate object nor am I a mechanical contrivance. If anyone needs proof of that statement, I nicked myself shaving a couple of days ago and unless I took leave of my senses, I bled. Oil or grease or catsup didn't drip from my chin into the bathroom sink.

Now, you may think that I am being an unreasonable curmudgeon who is railing about minutia. If so, I don't agree with you. As best I know the word "feedback" entered the lexicon as part of general systems theory and its exploration of servomechanisms. A servomechanism, in turn, is defined as "...a feedback mechanism that consists of a sensing element, an amplifier, and a servo motor, used in the automatic *control* (italics mine) of a *mechanical* (italics mine) device." ¹ Within the same metaphor, "feedback" is defined as "...the return of a portion of the output of a process or system to the input, especially when used to maintain performance or to *control* (italics mine) a system or process." ² In short, the implicit purpose of feedback is to exert mechanical control over a device that we certainly don't experience as human.

As a consequence, I feel compassion for, and at times anger toward, those who give and receive feedback and particularly for those who make their livings by teaching, training or instructing others how to do so. For instance, have you ever seen advertisements for management training programs entitled, "How to Give and Receive Feedback" or descriptions in academic catalogues of courses designed to improve one's feedback skills? Or have you ever participated in, or even worse, sponsored oxymoronic training ventures that focus on giving and receiving constructive feedback during performance appraisals?

Regardless of the lofty intent that may govern our desire to give and receive feedback, I am convinced that all of us who participate in the process for whatever reason are engaged in a destructive and ultimately immoral act because we are robbing ourselves and others of our humanity. As best I can tell, reducing ourselves or others to the state of being a piece of inanimate machinery is never an act conducive

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to individual development or organizational effectiveness.

Personally (and I have not selected that word by accident), I prefer to have prayerful conversations³ when I'm involved with fellow humans. Alternatively, giving others feedback and receiving it from them leaves me feeling distant, cold, detached and ultimately demeaned. It leaves me with the soul-searing sense that I am part of a dysfunctional air-conditioning system, refrigerator, or automobile whose cruise control mechanism doesn't work properly. In the final analysis, it gives me a case of the anaclitic depression blues, a very devastating form of melancholia, born of being alienated from others, that frequently makes us physically ill and sometimes kills us. ⁴

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Finally, if you have compliments, criticisms or other comments regarding this essay, for God's sake please don't give me any feedback. I would love to have a prayerful conversation with you, though, and would be delighted if you will honor me with that opportunity. It's an opportunity that only humans, but not inanimate objects, particularly machinery governed by servomechanisms, can share.

¹*American Heritage Dictionary* (3d Ed.) Houghton Mifflin. New York. 1996. Pp. 1650.

²Op. Cit. 669.

³Harvey, J. "Interrupted Prayers and Organizational Un*Learning." In Watkins, K. and Marsick, V. *Sculpting the Learning Organization*. Jossey Bass. 1993. Pp. 92-95. Prayer is defined as, "Caring, truthful communication ... and a requirement for organizational learning. op.cit. p.92.

⁴Harvey, J. "This is a Football: Leadership and the Anaclitic Depression Blues." In *How Come Every Time I Get Stabbed in the Back, My Fingerprints are on the Knife?* Jossey Bass. San Francisco. 1999, pp 107-136.

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