

M. Tamra Chandler

with Laura Dowling Grealish



FEEDBACK

(and Other Dirty Words)

WHY WE FEAR IT, HOW TO FIX IT

Praise for *Feedback (and Other Dirty Words)*

“Feedback can be tough to give (and receive!) but is so core to how we drive performance and improve as humans. This book offers practical frameworks and tools to consider as you leverage feedback to build relationships and improve results!”

—**Jesse Schlueter, Vice President of Learning and Leadership,
Nordstrom**

“An enjoyable and compelling read, this book shows leaders how to set the tone for the growth mindset to flourish. Packed with tips, it shows readers an easier path to hearing how they are doing, sharing what they see in others, and inspiring everyone to thrive.”

—**Elizabeth Hall, Vice President, Employee Experience, Cambia Health
Solutions**

“The way we work is changing. The traditional top-down hierarchal approach to management has been replaced by a collaborative work environment where employees thrive on real-time, continuous feedback from managers. In *Feedback (and Other Dirty Words)*, Chandler and Grealish offer business leaders an informative and easy-to-follow guide for transforming their work culture into one where employees no longer fear feedback but flourish with it.”

—**Derek Irvine, Senior Vice President, Client Strategy and Consulting,
Workhuman**

“Like it or probably not, people don’t grow without feedback. Can you deliver feedback without closing people down? Chandler and Grealish give the tools and methods for making feedback feel good. Not only will *Feedback (and Other Dirty Words)* help you with your next performance conversation, it can transform your company culture to be more agile and enjoyable.”

—**Marcia Reynolds, PsyD, Past President, International Coach
Federation, and author of *The Discomfort Zone***

“This quick read highlights real benefits that can follow strong feedback practices while simultaneously helping to remove the stigma associated with giving and receiving feedback—important topics for leaders.”

—**Roy Bivens, author of *Experiencing Improvement*; Managing Partner,
Orion Advisory; and CEO, Diamond Orthopedic**

“What do successful leaders and organizations have in common? A culture where feedback is welcomed and not feared and trust sits at the center. *Feedback (and other Dirty Words)* shows you how to get there. Both witty and enlightening! Read this . . . you’ll be entertained as much as you are informed.”

—**Christopher J. Cowan, MEd, FABC, Senior Vice President, Human Resources, Christiana Care Health System**

“At last! A concise, practical, actionable contribution to the sticky topic of feedback. In this breakthrough book, M. Tamra Chandler and Laura Grealish offer layers of useful information and support for changing our existing paradigms about feedback. This book details simple and powerful methods, backed by science, and everyday examples that the reader can relate to. The authors’ wealth of experience shows up in this compelling and digestible tool box.”

—**Beatrice W. Hansen, MSSW, PCC, Principal, Presence-Based Coaching**

“This very useful book teaches us that feedback is the key to all activities where we interact with others, especially at work. The lessons here show us how to do it simply and well.”

—**Peter Cappelli, George W. Taylor Professor of Management and Director, Center for Human Resources, The Wharton School, and Professor of Education, University of Pennsylvania**

“There is no leadership practice more effective than well done feedback to drive high performance through people. It is the equivalent of a leader superpower. Yet very few have mastered it. How could this power shortage be so severe and stubbornly stuck? What will it take to fix it? Read this clever and awesomely helpful book that digs deep to find the science and reasons behind this power failure, to fully appreciate the proven impact of good feedback, and, importantly, to find many useful and practical strategies and tactics for making your own feedback power super.”

—**Jeannie Coyle, former Senior Vice President of Human Resources, American Express, and coauthor of *Make Talent Your Business***

“Thoughtful feedback is both a gift and a critical data point along anyone’s journey to their own integrity—and the integrity of any organization. If you want to unleash a powerful and priceless resource, immerse yourself in this book and all that it teaches.”

—**Luke Timmins, Head of Engineering, Bungie**

FEEDBACK

(and Other Dirty Words)

OTHER BOOKS BY M. TAMRA CHANDLER

*How Performance Management Is Killing Performance—
and What to Do about It*

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Why We Fear It, How to Fix It

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with LAURA DOWLING GREALISH



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Feedback (and Other Dirty Words)

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*For Martha Marie Chandler,
who never hesitated to share frequent and focused feedback.
Mom, you are greatly missed.*

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INTRODUCTION

WE'VE GOT WORK TO DO

IF YOU ASK MEMBERS of any group of people—multinational corporations, sports teams, “mom and pop” businesses, rock bands, nonprofit boards, knitting clubs, you name it—they’re likely to admit that their organization pretty much sucks at feedback. Sure, I’ve met a few individuals who feel like they navigate the hazardous waters of feedback well, but at an organizational level we’re all pretty much adrift.

The depth of our collective angst over feedback has become obvious to me through my work in performance management during the past several years. In 2016, my first book, *How Performance Management Is Killing Performance and What to Do about It*, was published. Applying the concepts from the book, my PeopleFirm team and I work with dozens of organizations ranging from global corporations to private companies to NGOs to reboot their performance management approaches and processes, bringing the outmoded and deeply unpopular traditional approach to performance management into the modern world. While no two solutions we implement are identical, elements of the best designs tend to reoccur.

The most common element centers on enhancing feedback within and across the enterprise. Our best solutions focus on building organizational strength for growth-oriented feedback, not in a traditional manager-to-subordinate framework, but on a human-to-human and team-to-team basis, without regard for rank and title.

Leaders place their organizations' readiness for more of this kind of frequent, open, honest, and helpful feedback at the top of their list of goals. Yet, as soon as we begin to move toward a solution that's dependent on making feedback flow frequently and transparently, we hear the same things: "We're not good at feedback. We're not ready. We lack the skills. We lack the confidence. Our managers are unprepared. Our culture won't support it. People will weaponize it. We don't have the discipline. We just can't do it."

You get the idea.

It's this sadly predictable response that has convinced me that we need to take a collective approach to solving the problem of feedback once and for all. To create organizational cultures that encourage people and teams to thrive, grow, and do their best work in an environment that feels safe, we need to tame this beast. And if it's getting in the way for nearly all of us, then we absolutely must tackle it together. We can build skills and mentally prepare for this transformation, but first we need to understand what's standing in our way and how to get past it. We can do this by aligning to a new definition of feedback and a common set of principles, while adopting easy-to-use models and tools and practicing them every day. Let's put fear in the rearview mirror and head for a place where feedback helps and doesn't hurt—where we all can agree on a new and better concept of what feedback is, then develop a sustainable and workable cure for what's ailing it.

I AM NOT A RELATIONSHIP EXPERT

Spending so much of my time immersed in the world of performance management motivated me to devote my second book to the all-important subject of feedback. After weeks of outlining and brainstorming I worked with my writing partner, Laura Grealish, to put together a spiffy book proposal to send to our publisher. Every book proposal needs to identify the audience you intend to reach and suggest how you expect the book to be marketed. The original pitch to our publisher, Berrett-Koehler, claimed that this book would be for everyone: it could be used by businesses, schools, families, you name it. It seemed like the right idea; after all, feedback is a ubiquitous topic and a universal pain in the butt.

However, once we got the thumbs-up and began writing in earnest, I realized that, while the concepts and tips in this book could be used just about any time two or more people are interacting, the goal really was never to write a book to help people manage their relationships with their mothers, sisters, partners, or teenagers. My true aim was, and remains, helping organizations and the people in them get better, stronger, and more engaged. That's my passion, that's my life, that's what I was put here to do. Suddenly, just a few days into our writing, I told Laura about my revelation, and we agreed that this would definitely be a business book—specifically, one focused on making the world of work a better place through better feedback.

That evening I shared this news with my husband (who also serves as my line editor). He quickly agreed that this was a good idea—almost too quickly.

“You know, this absolutely makes sense,” he said. After a pause, he added, “I mean, it's not like you're some kind of relationship expert.” Well, he was right, but that stung a bit. Still, there's hope that editing this book helps improve his feedback skills.

I give you this peek behind the creative curtain only to make it clear that this book was written through an organizational lens. It's

about people and work and helping each other thrive in that environment. That doesn't mean you can't use these ideas and tips in the rest of your life, of course; if you find it helps you improve communication with your teenager or your spouse, then that's a bonus. But before you apply anything you find in this book to your personal life, remember this important fact: *I am not a relationship expert.* Just ask my husband.

FEEDBACK SHORTCOMINGS, FEEDBACK SUCCESSES

Your business will only rise to the level of your people. This simple truth has been my guiding principle as I've built and sustained environments where people advance rapidly, where they're frequently stretched to their maximum potential, and where clients demand the best of them every day. In every organization I've led, people are the only true assets. In real terms, that means business performance is directly correlated with the performance of the team and the individuals in it. Sure, that holds true for just about every business, but in professional services like consulting, it's hard-coded. The rates you charge, the work you win, the extent to which clients are willing to place their trust in you and your team, and the quality of support you provide are completely dependent on the capabilities and strengths of your people.

Where does feedback enter this picture? Well, without meaningful feedback and coaching, my people don't grow, and they don't succeed. And if my people don't succeed, neither does my business. Given the fact that I have a long track record of developing great consultants and thriving organizations, I must be the Queen of Feedback, right?

Wrong. I'm the first to admit that I also have work to do. What's more, my own organization sometimes struggles to meet its aspirational goal of sustaining a culture of open and candid feedback.

Trying to understand the dichotomy between my feedback shortcomings and my success in developing people and organizations has led me to explore my experiences with and beliefs about feedback. The conclusions I've come to are reflected not only in the ideas I'll share with you, but also in the habits and practices that my people and I apply every day in our work.

Here are a few of the bedrock ideas that feature prominently throughout this book:

MANY OF OUR BELIEFS AND IDEAS ABOUT FEEDBACK ARE INCORRECT AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE AND HAVE LONG BEEN DISTORTED BY OUR EXPERIENCES.

- » It's time we clear up some age-old misconceptions about feedback that continue to influence us today. In fact, it's time to embrace a new working definition of feedback.
- » A basic understanding of the science behind our reactions to feedback will help us move forward in a new, more effective way.

AS I PROPOSE IN THE TITLE, THERE IS A WAY TO FIX FEEDBACK AND PUT OUR FEAR OF IT BEHIND US.

- » Doing this will require a movement in which we all work together to fix feedback.
- » Simple ideas, conversation models, and tips and tricks can help us build our feedback muscle, both individually and collectively.

TO DEVELOP INDIVIDUALS AND BUILD TEAMS THAT THRIVE, GROW, AND OPERATE AT OPTIMUM LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE, WE MUST START WITH TRUST.

- » Trust is built over time through human connections that are kind and supportive, and that sends a strong message that *we're in this together*.
- » Trust isn't built in a day; it's an ongoing process that influences how we show up in every conversation, decision, and action.

6 FEEDBACK (AND OTHER DIRTY WORDS)

I hope this book will inspire you to join our movement to redefine and reboot feedback, because together we have the power to shape the world of work into a more connected and more inspiring place. How much more will we achieve as individuals and organizations if we can make that a reality? How much happier will we all be when feedback is no longer a dirty word?

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F##DB@CK!

CHAPTER 1

FEEDBACK HAS A BRANDING PROBLEM

IF OUR MARKETING COLLEAGUES were to do a branding assessment on feedback it would not score well. This should surprise no one, since it's been mishandled for centuries by most of humanity. We've built its horrible brand one lousy experience at a time. You know what I mean: using feedback to punish, shame, or manipulate. Saving it up and then heaping a big load of it on an unsuspecting employee. Letting our biases influence our perspectives. Insisting on sharing, even if it's clearly the wrong place and time. Telling one colleague, who tells another colleague, who finally tells the person we were beefing about what we said. Thinking that brutal frankness is the best approach or that passive-aggressive insinuation will get our point across. Sharing only when we want to make it clear that something, or someone, didn't meet our expectations.

And it's not just those offering feedback who are to blame. Think about how often we lash out defensively when we're presented with feedback. We argue the facts, we change the subject to the messenger's faults, or we get mad and stomp off in a huff. Maybe we listen quietly, then simply shut down. Or, worse yet, we don't listen at all.