

Leave It at the Stream: How to “Feedforward”

“Feedforward” sounds like some eating technique you might see advertised on late-night TV, guaranteeing weight loss with a faster metabolism.

Feedforward won’t make you thinner, but it may make you happier. Instead of rehashing a past that cannot be changed—feedback—Jon Katzenbach (author of *The Wisdom of Teams*, Harvard Business School Press, 1993) and Executive Coach Marshall Goldsmith coined feedforward to encourage spending time creating a future. In practice, co-workers are taught to ask for suggestions for the future, listen to ideas, and just say thank you. No one is allowed to critique suggestions or to bring up the past.

How many hours of organizational time and productivity are lost in the endless retelling of our co-workers’ blunders? How much internal anger and stress do we generate reliving real or imagined slights? On too many occasions, “team building” feedback exercises degenerate into “Let me tell you what you did wrong” and not “Let me ask you what we can do better.”

An old Buddhist parable illustrates the challenge—and the value—of letting go of the past. Two monks were strolling by a stream on their way home to the monastery. They were startled by the sound of a young woman in a bridal gown, sitting by the stream, crying softly. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she gazed across the water. She needed to cross to get to her wedding, but she was fearful that doing so might ruin her beautiful handmade gown.

In this particular sect, monks were prohibited from touching women. But one monk was filled with compassion for the bride. Ignoring the sanction, he hoisted the woman on his shoulders and carried her across the stream—assisting her journey and saving her gown. She smiled and bowed with gratitude as he noisily splashed his way back across the stream to rejoin his companion.

The second monk was livid. “How could you do that?” he scolded. “You know we are forbidden even to touch a woman, much less pick one up, and carry her around!”

The offending monk listened in silence to a stern lecture that lasted all the way back to the monastery. His mind wandered as he felt the warm sunshine and listened to the singing birds. After returning to the monastery, he fell asleep for a few hours. He was jostled and awakened in the middle of the night by his fellow monk. “How could you carry that woman?” his

agitated friend cried out. “Someone else could have helped her across the stream. You were a bad monk!”

“What woman?” the tired monk inquired groggily.

“Don’t you even remember? That woman you carried across the stream,” his colleague snapped.

“Oh, her,” laughed the sleepy monk. “I only carried her across the stream. You carried her all the way back to the monastery.”

The learning point is simple: Leave it at the stream.

Have you ever been amazed by a colleague’s near photographic memory of your previous “sins,” which have been meticulously catalogued and are then shared with you as part of an ongoing effort to help you improve? How much does this really help?

Try to remember the last time someone told you something that sounded like this: “Let me point out what you did wrong in the past.” How did that make you feel? What happened to the quality of your relationship? Were you more inspired?

Now try to remember the last time you asked someone for suggestions and heard, “Here are some ideas for the future. I hope that some are helpful to you.” How did you feel then? What happened to the quality of your relationship? Were you more inspired?

After engaging in this process, ask people which words best describe this activity. “Helpful,” “great,” “useful,” and “practical” are often mentioned. And the most commonly mentioned word? “Fun.”

What is the last word that you think of when you get feedback about the past? Fun. Remember when a boss called you up and sternly requested, “Why don’t you come to my office? I have some feedback for you.”

This isn’t to suggest letting go of the past. Feedback is sometimes necessary and sometimes useful. However, we can often cover almost all of the same ground by just sharing ideas for the future.

Racecar drivers are taught, “Look at the road ahead.”

Who knows? Not only may it help you win the race, but you’ll definitely have a better trip around the track.

From Marshall Goldsmith
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Take a LEAP

cultivate	L ove
generate	E nergy
inspire	A udacity
provide	P roof

- L** Where does the passion for my business, coworkers and customers come from?
How can I authentically show them how I feel?
- E** What effect do my actions have on the energy and behavior of people around me?
- A** What are the unnecessary, policies, and procedures that suck our energy?
What can we do to change them?
- P** What have I done today to show my commitment to my colleagues and customers?