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Foreword

In 1993, Coen Dirkx and I co-authored *Listen and Tremble,* the very first edition of this book. In 1996, we revised the book and re-published it as *Feedback: Mastering the Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback*. I've now revised the book once again. After all, none of us are exactly tongue-tied when it comes to sharing our views on what's wrong with the country, the world, the government, the management style of a particular company, etc. We generally have plenty to say about everything, all in the name of freedom of speech. But when it comes to giving one-on-one feedback, it's another issue entirely. We're either natural-born givers of feedback or we keep our opinions to ourselves or we're overzealous in our bluntness. We worry about hurting people's feelings, or else we don't really care one way or another how they respond to our criticism. This book is about giving and receiving feedback, about dealing with the associated fears and other negative emotions, about how to provide the kind of well-intentioned, well-crafted feedback that doesn't result in hurt feelings, bruised egos or defensive reactions.

Chapter 1 starts off with a checklist on how to give and receive feedback. In Chapter 2, we'll review some of the basic principles of communication so that you can identify the different sides of a message, distinguish between them and keep them in mind during the feedback process. In Chapters 3 and 4, I outline the ideal conditions for giving and receiving feedback and offer some helpful guidelines. In Chapter 5, we revisit the past to understand why we react defensively or try to justify our behaviour when we get feedback we don't particularly like. In Chapter 6, we'll take a closer look at the kinds of feelings that prevent us from using feedback to our advantage. Chapter 7 is about feedback and personal growth, how gaining insight into our feelings and working on personal development can help us use feedback more effectively. In Chapter 8, I focus on performance appraisals, disciplinary meetings and other practical applications of feedback in the workplace, and provide tips for dealing with resistance and handling complaints. There are plenty of practical examples to make the issues as clear as possible.

This book is dedicated to my children, Eva and Jan, for teaching me so much about myself, my touchy spots, my boundaries, my pitfalls and my allergies. May I continue to learn from them.

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Self-evaluation questionnaire on giving and receiving feedback

Giving feedback means telling someone else what you think of their performance. It also involves commenting on the person's behaviour and its impact on other people. Since it's always about how that behaviour affects you, the feedback you give says as much about you as it does about the other person.

Receiving feedback is the process of hearing how someone else sees and experiences your behaviour. This kind of feedback will tell you how effective you are at getting your message across in the way you intended. By accepting feedback and actively seeking it out, you open the door to greater self-awareness.

We all have some degree of self-awareness. Our friends, family and colleagues also know quite a bit about us, what we think and how we act. There are also certain things about ourselves that we do not know, but which others can see more clearly. The following diagram illustrates the different possibilities:

	Self	
	Known by self	Not known by self
Known by others	A Free space	B Blind spot
Not known by others	C Hidden self	D Unknown self

Figure 1. Known and unknown behaviour quadrants, Johari Window

The Free space contains things that you know about yourself, and which others know about you. It represents the parts of the conscious self – our personality traits, attitudes, behaviour, motivation, values and way of life – that we are aware of and which are known to others. The Blind spot represents things we don't know about ourselves, but

which other people can see more clearly. The Hidden self represents the behaviours, thoughts and feelings we know about ourselves but keep hidden from, and therefore unknown, to others. The Unknown is also referred to as the unconscious. This is the part of you that you can explore with the help of a qualified counsellor, therapist or psychologist.

You can reduce the size of Quadrant B by requesting feedback about your behaviour, generally by asking others how your particular behaviour affects them personally. Note, however, that the feedback you get will usually be quite general. You will then need to analyze and interpret the information yourself, with the risk that you may draw the wrong conclusion. By checking how others experience your behaviour, you can reduce the size of your Blind spot. The smaller your Blind spot, the greater your awareness of the impact you have on others, and the greater your effectiveness as a manager or staff member. Remember to ask for feedback about your strengths as well as your weaknesses. Of course, the feedback you receive will depend on the person who's giving it. Different people will provide you with different feedback. This is only to be expected, as different people will have different reactions to the same type of behaviour.

By soliciting and receiving feedback, you can reduce the size of Quadrant B. As a result, this enlarges Quadrant A, the Free space. Quadrant C, the Hidden self, can be reduced through the process of disclosure. Revealing more information about yourself, your viewpoints, your positions and your feelings allows others to form a more complete picture of who you are. This reduces the Hidden self and increases the size of Quadrant A. The larger the Free space, the better our relationships and the more effective and productive we are. The Free space can be seen as the space where good communications and co-operation occur, free from mistrust, confusion, conflict and misunderstanding.

If we use feedback to reduce the size of Quadrant B, then we need to respect a few conditions and guidelines. First of all, the receiver needs to be open and willing to hear the feedback. Unsolicited feedback simply doesn't work as a tool for raising self-awareness. Secondly, the feedback giver and receiver need to have established an atmosphere of mutual trust. You'll find more information on these conditions in Chapters 3 and 4.

Giving and receiving feedback is a daily occurrence in every organization, but…
- Are you aware of the impact your feedback has on other people?
- Are you always sure your message comes across in the way you want it to?
- Do you sometimes shy away from really speaking your mind?
- Do you ever bite your tongue in order to keep the peace?
- If you do, do you wonder why you do that?
- Is there a difference between you giving feedback to an employee, a colleague or your boss?
- Do your employees and colleagues know how much you appreciate their work?

One of the objectives of this book is to raise your awareness of these types of issues; it will get you thinking about the difficulties you experience when giving and receiving feedback. As a result, you heighten your awareness and are better equipped to change anything that isn't working for you.

You can use the following checklist to gain deeper insight into your current attitudes and skills when it comes to giving and receiving feedback. Read the questions carefully and take your time when answering them.

Checklist for giving and receiving feedback

Check true or false for each of the following statements. Be honest: it's about what's true or false for you personally; there are no right or wrong answers. This checklist was designed to help you assess your current skills and attitudes regarding feedback.

GIVING FEEDBACK

		True	False
1	Whenever possible, I avoid giving people feedback about their behaviour.	☐	☐
2	I avoid giving negative feedback since most people generally go away feeling upset about it afterwards.	☐	☐
3	When giving feedback, I compare that person's behaviour to other people.	☐	☐
4	I'm not really a 'pat on the back' kind of person because that sort of thing can be embarrassing for others.	☐	☐
5	When giving feedback, I find it easier to focus on the individual rather than on what they actually said or did.	☐	☐
6	I think it's more important to give feedback than to receive it.	☐	☐
7	When giving feedback, I don't really worry about the other person's feelings.	☐	☐
8	I usually wait a while before I give feedback about something that has happened.	☐	☐
9	I almost always give feedback when I'm annoyed or angry about something.	☐	☐
10	Once I've given my feedback, there's no need to check whether the other person has understood what I meant (a word is enough to the wise).	☐	☐
11	I think it's more important to point out the other person's mistakes than to try and solve the problem.	☐	☐

	True	False
12 I often give feedback without considering how it will impact on my relationship with that person in the future.	☐	☐
13 I never give negative feedback since I make mistakes, too. After all, to err is human…	☐	☐
14 I'm not comfortable giving positive feedback because it sounds so false.	☐	☐
15 I never give negative feedback because it could come back to haunt me later.	☐	☐

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

	True	False
1 I hardly ever get positive feedback from others.	☐	☐
2 When someone wants to give me feedback, I'd rather keep on working than interrupt what I'm doing and listen.	☐	☐
3 I believe in the old saying that a word is enough to the wise.	☐	☐
4 I often feel like interrupting people when they react to my feedback.	☐	☐
5 If I have to listen to several different comments about my work, I only react to the most negative one.	☐	☐
6 I think praise sounds over the top and insincere.	☐	☐
7 I generally take any type of criticism as a personal attack.	☐	☐
8 I'm often unsure of how to act when I get positive feedback.	☐	☐
9 I don't really care what my boss or my colleagues have to say about my work.	☐	☐
10 When I get feedback about my performance, it's hard for me not to get angry or anxious.	☐	☐
11 When I get feedback about my behaviour, I generally second-guess the motives of the person giving it.	☐	☐
12 I don't need feedback to help me learn new things.	☐	☐
13 Negative feedback makes me feel insecure and worthless.	☐	☐
14 When I get negative feedback, it's usually because the other person is in a bad mood or wants to get back at me for something.	☐	☐
15 When I get positive feedback, I usually think the other person is just trying to butter me up.	☐	☐

By completing this questionnaire, you have gained deeper insight into your skills and attitudes when it comes to giving and receiving feedback. In an ideal world, you would have answered 'false' to all of the statements above. How did you do? What are you doing right, and where do you see room for improvement?

Homework Assignment

What am I doing right when it comes to giving feedback?
Where do I see room for improvement?

What am I doing right when it comes to receiving feedback?
Where do I see room for improvement?

Come up with your own objectives for self-improvement and make the commitment to think about them over the next few weeks. Your objectives can be business-related as well as personal.
I would like to learn how to be better at _____

This book provides you with the tools you need to redirect your unproductive and/or unwanted behaviour (if you decide to use them). It features many real-life cases that highlight the importance of feedback in the workplace. In addition, there are a number of useful tips and practical guidelines for handling feedback more effectively. It can also help you identify your own pitfalls and barriers when it comes to giving and receiving feedback.

Homework Assignment

Over the next few weeks, pay attention to the way you deal with giving and receiving feedback. Think about your attitudes and behaviour and keep your self-improvement objectives in mind.

Based on the feedback you've given and received over the past few weeks, what have you learned about:
- yourself: _____
- your performance at work: _____
- your relationships with others: _____
- your own behaviour: _____
- other people: _____

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Communication and feedback

Imagine yourself in the following situation:

You have a management position in a company. One morning, as you stop off at the cafe for your usual cup of coffee, you catch Harry, one of your employees, doing his best imitation of you at the last team meeting. He's got quite an audience, and everyone is howling with laughter.

What kind of thoughts go through your head at that particular moment? How do you feel about what you see? How do you react? What do you do?

Depending on the way you interpret Harry's attempt at humour, there are a number of ways you might react:

1 You think to yourself: 'Get me out of here.' You feel embarrassed. You sneak out of the cafe before anyone sees you.
2 You think to yourself: 'Where does he get off on imitating me like that?' You are furious. You swallow your anger, but once everyone is at their desks, you ring Harry and summon him to your office immediately.
3 You think to yourself: 'I'm not going to be a spoilsport.' You feel embarrassed, but you don't show it. Instead, you laugh along with everyone else.
4 You think to yourself: 'Hmm, he does have a point there.' You're aware of your own shortcomings, and you know it's all been blown out of proportion for comic effect. You don't give it a second thought.
5 You think to yourself: 'Do I really act like that?' You feel a bit silly. You go up to Harry and ask: 'Is that how I really am?' Then you ask the others: 'Do you agree?'

You may, of course, react differently depending on your personality, your relationship with Harry, your company culture. With each type of reaction, you get a different result. In the first three cases, you shut down completely, making it impossible for you to learn anything from the indirect feedback you've got from Harry. In the fourth case, you admit there's some truth in the feedback, but you don't feel the need to change your behaviour.

In the last case, you're willing to look at your behaviour and how it affects others. Once you've gathered enough information, you can decide for yourself whether or not you want to change your behaviour.

Every day, all day long, our environment broadcasts 'signals' about our behaviour. Most of the time, however, we're just not operating on the same frequency. We don't pay attention, we're not sensitive enough or else we just don't think it's important. Our receptors are not switched on, so we miss the opportunity to learn something about ourselves. This has to do with our perceptions in communicating with others.

Perception, interpretation and communication

Communication is an interactive process of sending and receiving messages. As the sender, your objective is to get your message across. The reaction you get from the receiver will tell you whether or not you have achieved your objective. The receiver will also give you feedback, so you can check how closely their understanding matches your intent.

We receive information from all of our sensory input channels (visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and kinesthetic). This means that we pick up signals based on what we see, hear, smell, taste or feel. In order to process the information, the brain quickly deletes, distorts and generalizes the signals that come in, according to any number of elements that filter our perception. This is known as interpretation.

We have several kinds of internal processing filters: Meta Programmes, values and standards, belief systems, attitudes, memories and experiences, and choices and decisions. Our filters determine the way we perceive an event that is occurring right now. It is this perception of reality that puts us in a particular emotional state, and creates a certain physiology. The state in which we find ourselves then determines our verbal as well as non-verbal behaviour. This behaviour then affects other people, and they react accordingly.

The process of perceiving and processing information all happens very quickly. Most of the time, we are not even aware of it. The things we perceive, however, are only part of the story. We do not experience reality directly, only the reality we choose to accept as true. Our perceptions are heavily influenced by our own biases and tendencies. Perceptions are never neutral; for example, when you buy a new car, you suddenly see the same car everywhere.