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FINDINGS

RECOMMENDATIONS/SUGGESTIONS

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COACHING: TRY FEEDFORWARD INSTEAD FEEDBACK FOR LEADERSHIP PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

We live in a VUCA world where the business is dynamic, fast changing and evolving at a very high pace like never before. Given the growing demands of the organisation, employees are left with an infinitesimal scope for errors. Organisations often adopt coaching as an approach to maximise productivity by unleashing the potential of an employee. The sheer purpose of coaching is to plan and develop new skill and hone the existing ones. This self- awareness can be provided with feedback as a tool. Though feedback aims to enable an employee to learn from past mistakes and consequently take corrective measures, nonetheless, various studies prove that often feedback is inimical to employee's self-confidence and demotivating. Therefore, a considerable alternative to cover up for the lacunas of feedback as a tool would be the feedforward. With feedforward, organisations can foresee achieving their objectives with high levels of predictability and as a result minimise the likelihood of failure. The paper tries to address the perplexity over the two tools and explore if the feedforward has an edge over feedback or whether the two methodologies can go hand in hand to bring out the best results in coaching. Also, the paper suggests on how organisations craft out the best practices and policies of these approaches. The inferences have been drawn based on study of 30 review papers and 10 articles. The research considers only constructive feedback and focuses only on implementation of the feedforward and feedback approach from the coaching perspective.

KEYWORDS
feedback, feedforward, coaching

INTRODUCTION

Coaching is a development intervention, intending to bring out the best of an individual's potential (Jarvis, 2004) and organisations do understand the power of coaching as a tool to drive performance and growth. The expectations of the coach, coachee and the organisation (in case of a business relation) are set right from the beginning. But, how would you know that you are on the right path? How would you evaluate that your devised roadmap is on track (Porter, 2006)? Feedback is the solution to this problem. According to Fielden, feedback aims at increasing one's self-awareness. It is an essential skill to be a leader. It lets the employees know how they are doing and whether their performance is up to the mark, what are the leaders' expectations and how could they improve themselves. This communication is done effectively through a feedback (Jarvis, 2010).

Feedback mainly focusses on four dimensions (Frey and Fisher, 2010); feedback about the task (FT), about the processing of task (FP), about self-regulation (FR) and about the self as a person (FS). A few examples on the mentioned dimensions, would make the concept more clearer. Consider a situation in which the coachee is being coached on being a good interviewer (Grint, 2010).

About the task: "Always recruit a person smarter than the manager". This feedback has limited usefulness and might not be applicable to other tasks (Berglass, 2002).

About the processing of the task: "Make sure that the questions posed to the interviewee are not random but are based on the candidate's previous answers. This will also be a good method to check the integrity quotient". This kind of feedback is going to be more useful and comprehensive for the coachee to understand (Bass and Block, 1999).

About self-regulation: "Try going through all the resumes before the interview". This form is considered to be the best form of feedback as it suggests alternatives for the individual to improve at his competency (Eichinger, 2003).

About person: "You are a good HR professional". This is least useful feedback. Though positive, it doesn't add on to the individual's learnings.

Thus, feedback is an encompassing tool to make one aware of their potentials and capabilities (Susie and Hall, 2008). However, in spite of the good motive of the exercise, and the fact that all of us do want to get better at both personal and professional front, it cannot be denied that on receiving feedback, one feels criticised and becomes defensive (Thorn, Mc Leod and Goldsmith, 2007). None of us ever liked being pin-pointed by our teachers at school. It might be too direct and not considered very enlightening and motivating. It focuses on the past mistakes and not at the infinite future opportunities (Thorn and McLeod, 2013). At the same time, it is too direct and static and not dynamic and expansive.

In today's VUCA world and a workforce dominated primarily by the millennials who are big time opportunists and striving hard to be the best, feedback might not be an apt and effective tool any longer. Thanks to Marshall Goldsmith, there is a better way now called the feedforward. Feedforward is simply giving an individual a suggestion on for what they can do in the future, instead of dwelling on the past. It helps to revamp the future.

In the following section, an attempt would be made to compare the two concepts of coaching, feedback v/s feedforward. The paper would elaborately discuss the pros of feedforward over and feedback and how organisations could adopt the mechanism.

OBJECTIVES
1. To understand the conceptual difference between feedforward and feedback in coaching.
2. To infer on the efficiency of feedforward approach to coaching over feedback.

DISCUSSION
Consider yourself to be a singer. You just gave a live performance and you know that it did not go that well. Your music coach tells you that it seemed as though you hadn't rehearsed enough and that it wasn't a good performance (Bowles, 2007). That would make one feel awful, right? That is the traditional feedback. It

focuses on the past events that can't be changed, it's critical in nature and might make one feel defensive and filled with self -doubt. Now, contemplate if the coach asks you instead about what went wrong with the performance that day and what could be done to not repeat the same mistakes in the next performance. These questions make us feel respected, encouraged, relieved and hopeful. Such questions would lead to a shift into self-reflection and focus on solutions (Mc Dowell and Butterworth, 2014). Icing on the cake would be the coach sharing an idea that would help you to progress. This is the feedforward method. The two goals of feedforward method are "Learn as much as you can" and "help as much as you can" (Goldsmith, 2010).

There are two aspects to providing feedforward (Linley and Harrington, 2012);

1. Asking open ended empowering questions: Humans are generally more convinced with their own ideas and take more ownership and responsibility compared to when told what to do. In this way, we can shift the focus on more realistic solutions.
2. Asking permission: This is to share the coach's own experiences and ideas with the coachee. This makes the coachee feel less threatened and more receptive (Hay, 2003).

Goldsmith had coined the term with the idea to create and provide individuals, teams and organisations with suggestions for future and help them achieve a positive change in their behaviour. Fish and Fisher were of the opinion that feedforward is the process of making instructional decisions about what should happen next. It is commonly adopted method to coach athletes. Basketball players are asked to visualise the ball going into the hoop and aiming for a perfect shoot. Car racers are taught to look at the road and not at the wall. In the ancient times too, archers were asked to imagine their enemy in front of them and shoot the arrow (Caplan, 2003). According to Goldsmith, feedforward is the best tool to achieve success. The tool works well with successful people as they are open to ideas and resist negative ideas or judgement. Feedback would not work out in leadership coaching as leaders have a positive image of themselves. As per human psychology, people generally tend to accept feedback which is in alignment to their self- image and neglect the ones defying their self-image. There are some other benefits too over feedback, which are worth considering.

1. The most important reason which is being persistently reinstated in the paper also for preferring feedforward over conventional feedback is that it aids people to focus on positive future rather than failed past.
2. Mc Carthy and Milner said that like feedback, feedforward too is a tool of self-evaluation. However, instead of receiving inputs on what went wrong, the individual is aware of the skills he lacks and can proactively work upon them.
3. Negative feedback most commonly is not taken in the right spirit. Even if the feedback is given in a constructive manner, it might be offensive to the receiver, since it points out mistakes and shortcomings. Such a scenario will not arise in case of feedforward as it focuses on solutions rather than pitfalls.
4. Feedforward doesn't require any personal experience or acquaintance with the person. It can come from any person who is familiar with the task; anybody who has good ideas (Tschofen, 2016).
5. Theoretically, feedback should be on the performance and not the person. However, practically, it's hard to give a dedicated professional feedback. It ought to be taken personally. There is no probability of critique in feedforward as the matter of discussion is something that is yet to happen.
6. Feedback could reinforce the feeling of failure (Corso, 2016).
7. The other school of thought could also be that the feedback may not be an honest one, but diplomatic, which might not hurt the sentiments of the receiver, but does not benefit either (Hattie and Timperley, 2007).
8. Gams said that feedforward does not imply any judgement or superiority. It is based on the principle of being a "fellow traveller" than being an "expert".
9. Feedforward also gives a better understanding of what is expected. For instance, a professor setting his expectations clear helps in students getting better grades. Similarly, team leaders can set their goals and expectations more comprehensively (Goldsmith).
10. In Sen's opinion the tool does not classify people as good or bad. It does not rank people.

In spite of the numerous benefits that feedforward approach has in coaching, the fact that cannot be ignored is that without acknowledging and learning from the mistakes of the past, a control plan for the future cannot be devised (Kirkpatrick, 2000). Also, feedforward prevents a person from entering into their uncomfortable zones and always remains in a protective shell.

So, by and large if feedback promotes awareness, the feedforward boosts change in an individual.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Feedforward could prove to be a very effective tool for business coaches focussing primarily on behavioural change (Clutterbuck, 2016). The intentions of exercising the feedforward in organisations is that the workforce could develop skills that are needed to perform better and additionally also know the dynamics of demonstrating their new skills and knowledge at workplace.

Feedforward could be a good tool to set the goals for an employee and for skill gap analysis. It might well as be used to create goals and key result areas (KRAs). As feedforward fosters self-efficacy, the probability of goal attainment is higher. However, the system would be full proof only with the implementation of a concept by the name 'ring fencing'. (Danvforbes, 2016) Ring fencing the roles would mean giving the employees the ownership and at the same time allocating certain risk areas that should be handled by the next level reduces business risks.

It might not be a bad idea to consider feedforward as a complementary approach to the appraisal system. Wherein the feedback is provided on an employee's performance round the year, instead, now the employees could be made well aware of what would be expected out of them and the employees could accordingly drive their own success (Parlsoe, 1999). The feedforward coaching could serve the purpose of annual feedback and espouse an engaged human capital.

Nevertheless, tweaking existent practices and labelling them as feedforward approach could only prove to be detrimental to the organisation. The organisations will have to realise that the new approach will have new demands from everybody in the hierarchy. Organisations must put in efforts to be more transparent, managers more vigilant and the employees more accountable for this outlook to be successful. Managers will have to be trained effectively to practice feedforward method. It will have to be deep- rooted in the organisation's DNA.

CONCLUSION

The Great Napolean said "A leader is a dealer in hope". Whether a parent or a teacher or a manager or an entrepreneur, we all are leaders and we strive to make ourselves and the people around us better (Elaine, 2016). Feedforward helps in providing insights by minimising the stress for the receiver and lets the coach partner in offering solutions. Feedforward is associated with "fun" and is very effective and efficient for daily interactions between managers and employees. It not just is visionary in its approach but also establishes a good quality communication across all the levels of the organisation, conveying the right message to the recipient. The purpose of the paper is not to abandon the idea of feedback but to incorporate and practice the feedforward method to develop employees. This would definitely call for a shift in mind-set for one cannot be the substitute for the other. The onus lies with the manager to weight the situation and accordingly imbibe the feedforward within the feedback to make the objective of coaching more meaningful for both the employee and the organisation.

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