



FEEDBACK

The crucial element for building our teams

by **PAUL SEWELL**
Organizational Development
Joint Warfare Centre

Prevalence of Teams

AN ORGANIZATION CAN only thrive and grow through its staff. If the staff is not able to develop in their working environment, then the organization can stagnate and fail. Individual development is therefore extremely important and those organizations which invest in their staff reap the benefits. Individuals may indeed grow and learn through this development; however, the real success is when the staff of the organization learns together. Put simply, an organization truly grows and develops through its teams, and not its individuals.

The Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) is, of course, no stranger to teamwork. On a daily basis it relies on all kinds of teamwork for almost everything it does. This covers the whole spectrum, from the planning and execution of its major operational exercises to the relatively simple task of allowing someone on base. The JWC is not unique in these endeavours, as teams—of all sizes, levels and abilities—exist and perform every day across the Alliance.

Most of us serving within NATO are familiar with at least the fundamentals of strong, robust teams. There is also no shortage of research in the business literature about creating teams. Advice about the ideal team size, composition and methodology for this area is well

covered. Yet, if this knowledge regarding teams is relatively well known and the importance of strong teams is well documented, why do we invest so little time in developing them? And, why are most teams created by chance and rarely by design?

Part of this is due to the expectation of professionalism. This is the enduring, unspoken rule that because we are all professionals we will just "make it work". Those with a military background will know this mind-set well. However, this is not guaranteed. If we look back through our careers we have all had our fair share of membership in poor performing, life-draining teams with people we just simply can't stand. So, what is the critical factor which differentiates between these effective and ineffective teams?



Feedback or the "Killer App" for Teams: Feedback is often seen as one of the simplest activities shown to be vitally important for the robustness and health of a team. This factor can markedly improve teamwork and has shown to drive significant results. And yet, ironically it has also shown through surveys taken across the JWC and other HQs that this attribute of successful teams has been consistently lacking. Why is this so?

Common Barriers to Feedback

- **"NATO Polite":** Surprisingly, one explanation could be our multinationalism, which is also our strength. Those who work within the Alliance will be familiar with the phenomenon of "NATO polite". This is the tendency of not wanting to offend or criticize those from the other nations. It's as if there are these invisible barriers between our nations stopping us from giving feedback to someone from a different na-

tion, service, or rank out of fear that it may be seen as impolite or offensive. This bias forces us to see our colleagues more as representatives of nations rather than fellow human beings and members of our team. Consider how many opportunities you may have missed to giving your colleagues valuable feedback, which may have helped them learn and grow. It is ironic if we consider that the data from surveys show that we are crying out for feedback, but due to our tendencies, are unable to give and receive it. We're like the nervous teenager too afraid to ask the girl to dance.

- **The Negative Face of Feedback:** Feedback suffers from a bad press. It is often seen as something negative, about putting a person down. Granted, some of us come from nations and services which have their own special forms of giving feedback. These can include physical stress ("Drop and give me 20 push-ups!") or creative offensive wordplay questioning your parents' background. Those who have grown up in the military may have experienced this form of feedback in their earlier years, but there is no reason to believe that this style is still useful. During one of our courses, an Army officer at JWC once said, "If I'm not getting screamed at then I know I haven't completely screwed up, but I would also never expect to hear something positive." Stop and think for a moment of all the opportunities a person might miss out on throughout his/her career with this mind-set; how his/her development could have been accelerated if the

culture s/he grew up in had a more productive approach to feedback.

- **Lack of Skills for Giving Feedback:** A third barrier could be that we simply don't know *how* to give feedback. We don't know how to approach the issue or what to say. That is, we don't think we have the experience or techniques to be able to help our colleagues grow. True to human nature, when it comes to things we don't know much about, we often see the situation in terms of extremes. So, in the eyes of the uninitiated, feedback becomes only one of the two options on a very broad spectrum: shouting negative rants, or giving group hugs with "warm fuzzies".

Why is Feedback Important?

The reality is that feedback is more powerful than we think. It is vital for the health and resilience of our teams. In fact, current research has revealed that one of the most important factors for productive teams is directly related to feedback. Researcher Julia Rozovsky spent a number of years conducting a large study of Google's teams.¹ She looked at team size, composition and the power differentials between the members of hundreds of teams and was unable to find the "secret sauce" of the teams that prospered. It wasn't until later in her research that she determined the one factor which could be attributed to these productive teams. That key ingredient was what Prof Amy Edmondson called "*psychological safety*—the shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking."² According to this, teams with higher psychological safety were more effective because they were more comfortable giving and receiving feedback when they did not have to consider ranks and divisions within the teams. They felt more comfortable proposing new ideas, exploring different ways of working and are more open to changing how they work.

Based on this, consider some of the teams you have been in during your career, in particular some of your most favorite groups. Were you happy to be in them? Could

Below: A meeting with the Gender Focal Points where valuable feedback was shared with the Commander, the exercise planners and the scenario team. PHOTO: JWC PAO



- 1 Charles Duhigg, "What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team", New York Times, 25 February 2016.
- 2 Amy Edmondson, "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams", June 1999.



you speak freely and speak up if you thought something was going in the wrong direction?

Benefits of Feedback in the Teams

It is time to stop seeing feedback as something which is "nice to have", and see it for what it really is: a tool to make our teams stronger and more resilient. Being able to give good feedback and talking to each other strengthens the team's bonds, increases trust and rapport among the team members, and also improves the flow of communication to enable the team to be more action-oriented, productive and agile.

- **Feedback broadens our perspective:** Feedback is useful for both parties. At its core, it shapes and develops both the person receiving the feedback and the person giving the feedback, as they are both forced to look at what is working well and what is not. Being in a multinational organization such as NATO, we are fortunate to have exposure to new ways of working and approaches. When there is a clear channel for feedback between you and your colleagues, then the doors between you open to all these resources. Without dialogue and conversation, they remain locked.

- **Feedback accelerates our development:** No one has the monopoly on reality and it is unrealistic we as leaders and team members think that we have all the answers. Using feedback as a normal tool in our teams exposes us to the many different cultural, organizational and individual perspectives which can help unlock our problems and issues. Always keep in mind that what constitutes a problem for one

culture, service, or individual, may already be solved by another.

Implementation

The topic of feedback was brought up in a recent team-building programme at JWC earlier this year with a newly formed group comprising three sections, two of which were completely new. The responses were candid, but because they discussed this as a group, the traditional barriers mentioned above were not present. So, once we've established the power of feedback in teams how do we institute it? Unfortunately, feedback cannot be improved with a Staff Order or a Directive from the Chain of Command. For feedback to be authentic it always has to be built from within the team. The team has to agree collectively that it is OK to both give and receive feedback from the other members. This is important. Although most people inherently know the value of feedback, it's not until you discuss it as a group that it will be acceptable. This could be as easy as raising it at your next team meeting.

Some Pointers

The following pointers are worth considering for any team wishing to institute feedback. These pointers can be discussed in a weekly meeting, offsite, or wherever seems appropriate:

1. **Feedback should always be focussed on improving the individual and team:** It can be easy to simply tell people what they did wrong. However, focussing the feedback on constructive improvements is much more useful.

2. **Feedback should always be given with positive intent:** This is vital. If we know that the person giving us feedback has our development in mind then it's easier to accept, even if it might appear a bit rough around the edges. If we agree that there is always a positive intent behind giving feedback, then we can be more accepting no matter how it is delivered culturally.

3. **Feedback should be authentic and not forced:** From our work in the JWC, authenticity is always important and a key element of our reputation. Feedback should be delivered when you think it most appropriate, rather than something you put on your calendar.

4. **Feedback can be both constructive and positive:** Feedback does not always need to be about how we can improve. Even though we may sometimes act stoic and purely focussed on duty, there is rarely an abundance of positive feedback in our teams. This is especially important in NATO, where our colleagues, perhaps in their first NATO post, have no idea how well they are performing. Giving your colleague a simple positive remark or congratulating them on their recent presentation or paper can strengthen their motivation as well as strengthen the bond in the team.

In summary, feedback does not need to be a long drawn out process where both parties feel awkward. Instead, when it is more ingrained and commonplace it can become a natural tool to strengthen the resilience and effectiveness of the team and its members.

And all this goodness can begin with a simple conversation. †

TESTIMONIALS



**LT CDR
IAN FRASER**
Exercise Event Manager

"We should remember that feedback can also be positive, it's important to also highlight what is going well."



**LT COL
CSABA ELEKES**
Staff Officer (OPFOR)

"When someone gives me feedback, I consider it an honour to hear their thoughts."



**LT COL
HOLGER JUDT**
Staff Officer (OPFOR)

"For me, feedback means that my co-worker cares about me and that's a good feeling to have in a team."