



Dread Feedback Conversations? Try Flipping Them Inside-Out

By Sarah Elliott, PCC, CPA

Do you ever dread giving feedback ... even when you know it's important? In the accounting profession, we have a contentious relationship with feedback. Deep down, we know that exchanging feedback, which is simply information regarding prior behavior, can serve as a catalyst for performance improvement.

Yet, if we know this, why do we dread it so much? Why do we see it as something we have to suffer through, rather than the benefits it provides?

When we asked accountants to share the first words that come up for them when they think of exchanging feedback in the workplace, here are some of the positive responses we received:

- Motivating,
- Helpful, and
- Important.

Here are the negative responses we received to the same question:

- Uncomfortable,
- Awkward,
- Ambiguous,
- Inconsistent,
- Time-consuming, and
- Scary.

Isn't this interesting? Feedback is an exchange of information designed to improve performance. Yet, more people view the feedback process as having a negative impact on their life. Something that should be supportive for growth is instead perceived as negative.

It gets worse. Too often, we hear the following: "If I'm not receiving feedback, I assume I'm doing OK" or "No news is good news." These comments are usually shared in a disappointed, deflated tone.

Why do they sound so sad? Statements like these usually indicate the following aspects of a feedback culture:

- Most, if not all, feedback exchanged is negative. "Since feedback is bad, I'm glad I haven't received any."
- Open communication is discouraged. "I'd rather not talk, so I can continue to assume I'm doing OK."
- In the absence of communication, people make assumptions. "I don't know how I'm doing, but since I haven't heard anything, I assume I'm doing OK."
- People feel disempowered and demotivated, since all they have to aim for is "doing OK."

Feedback does not have to be awkward, ambiguous or sad. These conversations can provide amazing opportunities to:

- Embrace our humanity by welcoming vulnerability,
- Practice coaching techniques that empower growth in others, and
- Connect at a deeper level with one another through shared learning.

However, to unlock these opportunities, you must change the way you see and do feedback. Here are four ideas to do just that.

1. Embrace a More Empowering Mindset

A mindset is a set of beliefs or attitudes. These beliefs are manufactured by the mind based on your upbringing, experiences and the accumulation of (mostly unchecked) thoughts you've assimilated over time. A mindset is a lens through which you see the world. It is the birthplace of your actions. How you see the world (your mindset) affects what you do in the world. Therefore, your mindset creates your reality.

If you tend to view it through a negative lens, let's start by examining your beliefs about feedback with the following questions:

- How do you view feedback?
- How do you view others with whom you exchange feedback?
- How do you view your role in feedback?

Thinking that feedback is difficult, awkward and problematic brings negative energy to your conversations about it. If you see other people and their challenges as problems that need to be fixed, you will want to get the conversation with them over with as quickly as possible. The person on the receiving end will feel like they are a problem.

When you see yourself as the bearer of bad news, you may procrastinate on checking this unpleasant task off your to-do list. To provide better feedback, you must first see it differently. You must shift your mindset to one of an investor. Two core beliefs comprise the investor mindset. The first is:

I believe in every person's ability to continually learn and grow (including my own).

When we value all experiences – the successes and the struggles – as an opportunity to learn and grow, we realize them as the gift they truly are. We welcome mistakes as vehicles for learning and progress. This belief strengthens our resilience when times get tough.

This belief also challenges us to notice how we view our colleagues. If you view a colleague as a problem, or as someone who is broken or incapable of change, you limit the possibility of growth for them.

Think of someone you believe is incapable of change. How does this belief impact your interactions with this person? Does it create friction? Does it limit what you talk about with them?

When you show up to a conversation with judgment about the other person, they will sense this and close themselves off to you and your message. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they will resist you and the feedback you are proposing. (Isn't this fascinating? The way we view someone actually perpetuates the beliefs we have about them.)

Instead, what if you simply accept that we are all flawed and also capable of making improvement? How might this new belief impact your feedback conversations?

Take a moment to reflect on your own experience. Has there ever been someone who believed in you – someone who believed you could do hard things, things that you may not have believed you could? (I hope so.) What difference did that make for you?

The greatest gift we can give another human being is to accept them as they are and believe in their potential for growth.

The second core belief of the investor mindset is:

I am committed to my colleagues' growth and will have regular conversations about their performance.

An investor invests time and energy today to pave the way for a better future. An investor cares about how others are doing and actively supports them today to ensure they receive the development they need to thrive for the long-term.

Think about someone who has invested in you and your career. Did you deeply appreciate that person? Don't we all need people who are willing to invest in us?

Imagine how embracing an investor mindset could shift your thoughts and approach to feedback. It could enhance the dynamics of your relationships dramatically, creating

a deeper level of collaboration and trust. By investing, you can make a significant difference in the lives of others!

2. Model Effective Feedback Relationships at the Top

Nothing crushes a culture of feedback more than a group of executive leaders who don't seem to acknowledge the need for it. How often do your executives talk about it and its importance at your organization? What kind of energy and passion do they exude when they talk about it?

Words must be followed by meaningful action. Do executive leaders invest in others by engaging fully in feedback conversations? Do they openly solicit it on their own performance? When executive leaders get vulnerable and participate fully in the process, they create the psychological safety for others to do the same.

3. Start With What's Working Well

Why should we start feedback conversations with the positive? Because it's where the good stuff is!

Correcting someone's mistakes is helpful, but helping them understand what they do well can be even more helpful. You can help them identify their strengths. Our human potential lies in our zone of strength. It's where we feel most alive, do our best work and expand our positive impact.

An investor helps the performer identify what they're doing well because it:

- *Helps them understand what they should continue doing.* Human beings do not automatically repeat what they do well in every situation. We must shine the light on the positive behaviors, so they notice and intentionally continue them.
- *Challenges them to stop seeing feedback as something negative.* CPAs are often hired to find things that are wrong. You're trained to find the errors. (Just think about the last time you received review notes. How many said something positive?) Seeking out errors can become a mindset – a mindset that damages the feedback process. You must focus on what is going well, too, so your feedback provides a complete picture of performance.
- *Eases the way for constructive observations.* If I know you're seeing all of me (not just my errors), I'm much more open to learning where I can improve. I will be less defensive because I understand you're not blaming or judging me. We're learning together. We're on the same team. You're investing in me.

4. Stop Delivering Feedback and Coach Instead

Traditional models focus on the deliverer of feedback (the person who delivers it to the performer of the work). The deliverer does most of the talking by sharing their

ACCOUNTANTS CONFIDENTIAL ASSISTANCE NETWORK

TXCPA
ACAN

The accounting profession is demanding of your
TIME, ATTENTION & ENERGY

It shouldn't take a toll on your
MENTAL & PHYSICAL HEALTH

Call **866-766-2226** or visit **www.tx.cpa/resources/acan**

If you are struggling with alcohol addiction, substance abuse or mental health issues, ACAN is here to help. ACAN provides a confidential conversation with CPA volunteers who have first-hand experience with these issues. ACAN helps you learn how to merge healthier living with your demanding accounting career, and can provide referrals to professionals who are familiar with your unique challenges. Don't hesitate to get the help you need today.



ACAN convenes regular meetings of CPAs, exam candidates & accounting students for mutual support & opportunities to assist others. Call or visit us online to learn more.

observations and insights. The deliverer must provide insights that are timely, specific and digestible. When the deliverer feels 100% responsible for feedback, if they are feeling unprepared or uncertain of how the receiver will react, they will likely delay or even neglect providing their comments. Valuable learning opportunities are lost.

We propose turning this traditional model inside-out. Shift the responsibility for feedback from the deliverer to the performer. Shift the role of the deliverer from teller to coach.

Thanks to the mindset shift you've made, show up as an investor who believes in the performer's ability to grow and learn. Now, as a coach, facilitate a process for the performer to share their own perspective.

Let go of the pressure to get it perfect. Instead, simply show up as a partner in learning to help the performer uncover their opportunities for growth.

Start with the performer. Instead of feeling like you need to have all the answers, simply ask questions to help the performer reflect on their own performance.

Step 1: Start with what worked well

Ask open-ended, performer-centric questions focused on what worked well, such as:

- What did you do well on this project?
- What did you specifically do to make that happen?
- What did you learn?

Seek to understand the performer's perspective about their performance. Actively listen, repeat what you heard and encourage further observations. Continue asking questions from a place of curiosity.

After the performer shares their perspective, share yours. At this point, the performer has done most of the work, so simply endorse their observations where appropriate and add your own. Note any instances where you may see things differently.

Step 2: Identify opportunities for growth

Then, ask open-ended, performer-centric questions focused on areas for growth, such as:

- Where did you get stuck on this project?
- What did you find most challenging? Why?
- What would you do differently next time?

Allowing the performer to uncover their own challenges takes some of the pressure off you. It also encourages ownership, as the performer takes responsibility for their challenges and the related solutions.

Just as before, actively listen, repeat what you are hearing and encourage further observations on these challenges.

When the performer has shared all their observations, share your own – endorsing, adding to, and revising their observations where appropriate.

Step 3: Summarize the learning and identify action steps

Next, ask the performer to clarify what they learned and uncover the action steps needed to improve their performance:

- What are you taking away from this conversation?
- What are you going to do next?

As before, actively listen and encourage further observations. Then, endorse, add to, or revise their observations where appropriate.

This step ensures the conversation moves from insight to action. By asking the performer what comes next, you empower them to take responsibility for their further development. After all, it's their career, isn't it?

Step 4: Plan for the next conversation

Before wrapping up the conversation, ask the performer, "When should we meet again?" Remember, as an investor, you committed to having regular conversations with them to support their continued growth. Asking this question creates momentum, consistency and accountability for continued feedback conversations.

Be sure to allow yourself and the performer time to adjust to these new ways of being and doing. This performer-based approach should awaken the performer's observation muscles, so they will be more aware of their own successes and struggles for the next conversation you hold.

By flipping feedback inside-out – using a coaching approach that starts with the performer's perspective – you not only change the process, you transform your relationship with the performer. You become an investor in their success and move from a hierarchical relationship to a partnership, learning together. Opportunities are created to connect at a deeper level, building trust. Individual and collective potential is unlocked at your organization.

Just imagine ... instead of dreading feedback, you can create a culture where you and your colleagues actually look forward to these conversations!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sarah Elliott, PCC, CPA, is the co-founder and principal of Intend2Lead LLC, a leadership development company that coaches accountants to access the #DimensionofPossible through leadership coaching, consulting and group learning. Contact her at sarah@intend2lead.com.