



HIGH HOPES
CONSULTING

Decoding Feedback

(what they really want to
tell you but don't!)



Nicola Hopes is an executive coach and change management consultant who's worked with leading organisations around the world to help their businesses thrive.



Her clients love her ability to help them **'think bigger, act bigger and plan smarter.'**

Over the last 22 years she has worked with global leaders from organisations such as the Co-operative Group, Knight Frank and Brittany Ferries to deliver inspiring leadership and lasting change with award-winning results.

Those little words that strike fear into the heart of any leader: 360-degree feedback!

It's sold to you as a great learning experience. It feels like a trip to the dentist.

In the real world, getting quality feedback can be a minefield.


To understand what your team really thinks, you have to be brave and hear some home truths. So, sit back, relax and read on. I promise you'll be fine.

Tom Peters 

@tom_peters

"Straight shooter." "Tough but fair." "Tells it like it is." "Cuts to the chase." "No nonsense guy." All of these are synonyms for ... asshole.

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Feedback is dogged by the same obstacles that all communications are – people.

We don't always listen to the feedback we're given or give feedback clearly enough.

This results in leaders having long term blind spots which hold them back from their true potential throughout their careers.

Or individuals thinking they're doing a great job and not registering the collective eye roll whenever they speak.

If you want both you and your team to be successful you have to master the art of feedback.



The thorny problems with feedback



Problem #1 – you only see what you want to see

Picture the scene: Your feedback report pops into your inbox. You swallow hard. You get that sinking feeling in your gut as you open it. What do they think? Will my ego take it? Will this cost me my bonus?

As you read the feedback you start to relax and sit back.

Actually, this doesn't seem too bad. They seem quite positive about me. There's some small stuff to think about, but it doesn't feel significant.

But... are you actually reading the truth behind the words or just what you want to see?

Are you interpreting the responses in a way that maintains the status quo because it's easier that way?

We all delete, distort and rationalise. Fact. To cope with the daily onslaught of information our brains must process, we create our individual model of how the world works. This model is the mental filter through which all information passes. And no two filters are the same.

As a result, you can fall into the trap of minimising or finding excuses for your behaviour – without consciously knowing that's what you're doing.



If I had a tenner for every time I heard the ***following excuses**, I'd be on a beach in St. Barts, sipping rum cocktails and deciding my next spa treatment...

* "Mark doesn't really have any idea what I have to do anyway so his feedback's irrelevant, and nothing would be good enough for Debbie – she's a bit of a perfectionist."

* "The project Bob's on about was a nightmare for everyone so that's not what it's really like to work with me."

* "Julie fed back that she wanted more challenge from me, but she couldn't take it if I did."

Cut to their conclusion: Great. I don't need to do anything differently. I'm going to file that feedback and celebrate with a posh coffee.

Facing into what people really think takes guts and a willingness to see it.



Problem #2 – you need an enigma machine

In my many years of leading, consulting and coaching I've learned a little about decoding feedback. Here are few hum dingers...

We all know that people don't always say what they mean.



What they say...	What they really mean...
You're really approachable	You're easy talk to you but might be a push over, too timid to make a real decision
You're a real character	You're difficult to do business with so we have to indulge you
You're a real joker	You use humour to manage social awkwardness or make points that you're too scared to make straight-faced
You're a bit of a butterfly	You're a flippin' nightmare to tie down. You don't finish anything you start. Everyday it's a shiny new thing and it's exhausting!
You're very strategic	You'd better have some good people around you who deliver because you can't execute your ideas for toffee
You're detail-oriented	You're a pedant who drives everyone mad with your fault-finding and eerie ability to spot a rounding error on a 200-line spreadsheet
You're focussed on tasks	You can just about spell the word 'people!' Your colleagues think you're a robot who wouldn't stop to put them out if they were on fire
You're quick to challenge	You're a fighter who opposes most things from the outset and will explain in detail why they're a dreadful idea. You think this makes you a critical thinker, a realist. We think you're out of your depth and lack vision
You're hard to influence	You don't listen

Any of those sound familiar?

Do you have pangs of doubt that you've taken feedback at face value and dismissed it too easily?

You're not alone.



Problem #3 – culture and politics make it hard to get the truth

So, we've established people don't always say what they mean.

But there are good reasons why you're getting fobbed off.



Avoiding offence:

Let's face it many people, especially the British, would rather stab themselves in the eye with a fork rather than give you honest feedback to your face. For most people giving tough feedback is hard.

Unless they're a sociopath, they care about how you feel. In trying not to offend or provoke a confrontation, they've watered their true opinions down.



Hierarchy counts:

Who wants to be the person who gives tough feedback to those who can make their working life difficult? Giving feedback to peers and seniors is a political nightmare.

Too honest:
The difficult one who's too big for their boots.

Too nice:
Lacks an opinion or credibility.

The downside:
The more senior you get, the less honest feedback you get.



Vague summaries:

Quality feedback takes real thought to do it justice, and most people dodge the chance.

They default to meaningless summaries and platitudes to get the task ticked off the list.

They're busy getting through their day and your development is not their top priority.

Turns out that you're not the centre of their universe. I know. Crushing, isn't it?



How to face feedback and get results

So, how do you find your way through the waffle to get meaningful feedback you can take action on?



1. More talk, less forms

A conversation is easier and richer than a form. And it prevents the person who's giving feedback having to carefully word and re-word their written thoughts for every possible interpretation.

If you need a written record, you can always ask them to give you bullet points in advance or you can write up what you hear in the conversation.

Give it time. Don't book a 15 min slot and make it feel like a rushed tick box exercise.

Watch your body language. It doesn't matter how many times you say you're listening if you grimace every time you hear anything negative.



2. Ask yourself who and why

Don't be that person who sends the same generic, scattergun feedback request to everybody in your team or department. You'll hear the collective groan when it lands in their inbox.

Limit the feedback requests to people who can give you a genuine insight.

Explain why you've chosen that person e.g.: the project you worked on together; you want to get the best out of them; there's been a difficult situation etc.

Always get a full 360 view – senior stakeholders, peers, those who work for you or at a lower level. I know people who get wonderful feedback from their team, but their peers would rather take the stairs than get caught in a lift with them. And folk whose boss thinks they're great, but their team are two emails away from full on mutiny.

Let them know you plan to act on what they have to say.



3. Ask specific questions

If I see one more piece of feedback that a client has received saying how 'nice' they are or how 'hard working' they are, I'll bang my head on the desk.

It doesn't mean anything. And it doesn't tell me anything about their impact or success.

When you ask for feedback, ask questions that will give you something tangible. Some tasty nuggets for you to consider. For example, you could ask:

- What's the biggest thing you'd change about working with me and why?
- What's the most significant thing I contribute to you and what's the impact?
- Can you rate and review me on the following 5 behaviours...?

Turn lead into gold

Here are a few suggestions on how you could follow up on the easily misinterpreted feedback I mentioned earlier.

If the feedback you're getting still isn't specific enough, you can ask for clarification to make it more meaningful.

If you've heard this...	Follow up with this...
You're really approachable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What's the best and worst thing about me being approachable? ▪ Are there times when it's been a problem? ▪ How can I get the balance right?
You're very strategic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What happens or doesn't happen when I'm being very strategic? ▪ Am I losing the doers in waffle? ▪ Do I find a way to turn the ideas into reality?
You're very focussed on tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ When is this a problem? ▪ How does this come across to you? ▪ What do you think I'm ignoring when I'm focussed on task? ▪ What would be better for you?
You're quick to challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How does the challenge come across? ▪ Does it make it better or worse? ▪ Does it help to build an idea or squash it before it gets going? ▪ How could I challenge more positively?

And now, the end is near

I'll leave you with this: If you get good feedback and know how respond to it, you'll get better. It's that simple.

You'll be able to:

- **Fix what you need to fix**, to be a truly inspiring leader
- **Take your team with you**, because you listen and value their views
- **Confidently listen**, without taking feedback to heart
- **Own your quirks** and how you stand out as a leader
- **Fulfil your true potential** and go places in your organisation
- **Nail that new opportunity** that you didn't think you could e.g., a promotion, new job, event speaking, or setting up a business!

I've witnessed the change this can make in people. And it's one of reasons I get out of bed in the morning – in addition to a cat with boundary issues.



**So, focus on feedback.
Dr. Pepper. What's the
worst that can happen?**



How I help individuals and organisations

Coaching

I help leaders to step up and perform

"I feel more of a Chief Exec now than I have ever been"

CEO, Housing Association

"We want to hear what she has to say – and she makes it real. She has the knowledge and know-how to support, discuss, persuade and take the team on the journey"

CCO, Travel Company

Speaking

I deliver engaging, interactive sessions for team meetings, (virtual) away days and conferences

Speaking topics include:

- Deliver lasting change with less – where to compromise and where to invest
- Do less and do it better – a dose of reality about priorities
- How to be a distinct and memorable leader

Consulting

I make complex change happen for organisations who are evolving, growing and modernising

"Nicola identifies issues, explains the causes and then provides pragmatic and actionable answers to fix them. Nicola is a great asset to a newly formed change board, so they operate effectively from the very beginning"

COO, Property Firm



**Get in touch to chat about how
I can help you or your organisation:**

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