

# Peer-Based Feedforward Protocol

Stephen Starkey

December 22, 2016

Copyright © 2016 by Courage Labs, LLC

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Source code is hosted at <https://github.com/couragelabs/feedforward>.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2016

ISBN 978-1-365-16818-5

# Contents

<b>Contents</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>vii</b>
0.1 An Alternative . . . . .	viii
0.2 Warning . . . . .	viii
0.3 Overview . . . . .	ix
0.4 Reminders for Facilitators . . . . .	x
<b>1 Getting Ready</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Materials . . . . .	1
1.2 Establishing the space . . . . .	2
<b>2 Protocol</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 Introduction to the Protocol . . . . .	5
2.2 Emotion Inventory . . . . .	6

2.3	Alliance . . . . .	7
2.4	Confidentiality . . . . .	8
2.5	Direct Experience Practice . . . . .	9
2.6	Listening and Giving Feedback Practice . . . . .	10
2.7	Contemplation of Personal Situation . . . . .	14
2.8	Expressing Willingness to Receive Feedback . . . . .	15
2.9	Feedforward Process . . . . .	15
2.10	Feedback Process . . . . .	18
2.11	Closing . . . . .	19
<b>3</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Modifications</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Standalone Uses</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Thank You</b>	<b>27</b>

# Acknowledgments

This book wouldn't have been possible if it weren't for the inspiration of the OpinionLab development team. Their willingness to allow me to experiment on them has been very helpful, and their rich feedback has made this book what it is today.

My friends Jake Calabrese and John Jacobsen have also provided invaluable advice, helping me see the world from the eyes of people who aren't exactly neuroscience nerds. Their gentle encouragement to keep providing context is the reason you can understand what I've written.



# Introduction

The latest in neuroscience<sup>1</sup> suggests that people rarely accept feedback from others if they aren't already primed to link it back to some recent experience they have already had. If I don't remember when I said that not-nice thing to Sally, in 6 months when she tells me about it, I won't believe anything is wrong. What's even worse, receiving feedback from a superior is rarely possible – the situation is already so emotionally charged that the brain will probably just remember how to avoid that situation in the future.

This is difficult to work with. In most traditional performance reviews, whether by managers or peers, feedback is often given out of context, too delayed, or paternalistically. When you're not open to receiving feedback, you rarely improve in ways that are helpful to yourself or others, choosing instead to create protective measures, which effectively separates you from those who are just trying to help. This could be team-destroying, or at least team-disempowering.

---

<sup>1</sup>Whiting, Dr. Jim, Elizabeth Jones, Dr. David Rock, and Xenie Bendit. "Lead Change with the Brain in Mind." *NeuroLeadership Journal*, October 1, 2012.

## 0.1 An Alternative

The alternative presented here is to ask people to evaluate themselves frankly. In this book you will find a protocol designed to help people come to their own insights, while also receiving helpful information from their own team. This has the effect of not only amplifying each person's learning, but creating a bonding experience with teammates that is meaningful and connected to their actual work experience. This mitigates the likelihood of statements like, "He's a nice person in social situations, but I wouldn't trust him to X."

Instead, they'll say (for example), "He really understood where he fell down for the team at a crucial time and committed to changing his own behaviors in the future. I really respect him for that!"

## 0.2 Warning

This protocol is not for the faint of heart. It is also not for new teams. A certain level of trust is required before a group of people will even think about giving and receiving this kind of frank feedback in a semi-public setting. It should be considered an advanced teamwork practice.

**Read through this book in its entirety before trying it out** unless you have had formal training in facilitation and/or working with this protocol specifically. Internalizing it yourself will make facilitating much easier. You may also want to get help from someone who has facilitated this kind of process before.



## 0.3 Overview

Using the SCARF model<sup>2</sup>, and various techniques drawn from the coaching profession and other wisdom traditions, you can create an environment for optimal learning and minimal threat. The model helps you consider activities that maximize rewards and minimize threats on the 5 major types of social threat: **S**tatus, **C**ertainty, **A**utonomy, **R**elatedness, and **F**airness.

The protocol, in summary, will:

1. Create a space that is optimized to remove status and certainty threats;
2. Establish safety, amplifying autonomy, relatedness, and fairness;
3. Support emotional regulation in participants through Direct Experience practice;
4. Amplify listening skills;
5. Give participants an opportunity to reflect on their own situation;
6. Give the team an opportunity to hear those reflections and add to them if needed; and finally
7. Close on a positive note to cement learning and maintain trust.

---

<sup>2</sup>Rock, David. "SCARF: A Brain-based Model for Collaborating with and Influencing Others." *NeuroLeadership Journal*, January 1, 2008.

## 0.4 Reminders for Facilitators

As facilitator, you should:

- NOT take notes.
- Always carefully explain the protocol.
- Always hold the team to the rules rigidly.
- Protect the team from outside interruptions.

These rules create an environment of fairness and autonomy.

# Chapter 1

## Getting Ready

In order for this activity to be successful, some attention should be paid to space and language. This area will help you prepare for a great meeting.

### 1.1 Materials

Each team member should be supplied with a notepad, a pen, and an index card. If the space doesn't have lots of white boards that everyone can see, a flipchart or two would also be helpful. You should have a timer, and perhaps a nice bell to help with notifying participants it is time to move onto the next phase.

## 1.2 Establishing the space

An ideal space has a table with chairs, but the table should be completely clear. This helps keep distractions down.

It is helpful for the environment to be spacious, with lots of natural light. It should also be well-stocked with snacks and other kinds of decorations that the group would find enjoyable. Nobody likes to walk into a room covered with tacky artwork.

One might consider this part of the protocol frivolous. However, every touch of care adds up. When you walk into a room, and the first thing you notice is how cramped everything is, aren't you already in a bit of a bad mood? One can communicate how much effort one has put into this protocol and set everyone at ease with very little effort.

Prepare, on large pieces of paper and painter's tape (I prefer to use a roll of paper over flipcharts – cheaper and better for the environment) or sections of whiteboard, the following:

1. The overall protocol in Chapter 2. Pulling the top-level items from the Table of Contents should be fine.
2. One page per section each for the two questions in the Alliance, Section 2.3.
3. The Levels of Listening in Section 2.6.
4. The model mentioned in Speak With Intent, Section 2.6.
5. The interview questions in Section 2.9.



# Chapter 2

## Protocol

This protocol is very deliberate and rigid to ensure fairness and a contemplative state of mind, to minimize emotional over-reactions. We remember events better when we experience a slight emotional charge, either positive or negative. Each step will be explained in summary and in detail.

### 2.1 Introduction to the Protocol

Explain that this could be a difficult process. The overall purpose is to give and receive feedback about individual performance. Then explain the protocol steps in detail.

This provides a certainty reward. Also remind folks that this process is completely optional. In order to guarantee fairness, though, those who participate should try to do so fully, and if at any point they feel they are unable

to continue due to emotional reasons, they should feel free to depart the situation until they feel they can continue. There is no need to ask permission. A person's strong feelings will never be held against them. This provides an autonomy reward.

## 2.2 Emotion Inventory

As a round, everyone shares their emotional state using a single word to label each emotion they are feeling, along with whether or not they are able to set that emotion aside. No long-winded responses should be allowed.

This is designed to help everyone stabilize their emotional state. Forcing yourself to come up with one word to label your emotion causes the pre-frontal cortex to steal energy from the amygdala, which naturally causes some of the emotional charge to dissipate.

Immediately cut off any crosstalk. The person who is speaking must not ever be interrupted, in order to maintain fairness.

*Alternative:* You may consider using the four core emotions<sup>1</sup> of Mad/Angry, Sad, Glad/Happy, Afraid, and allowing participants to express each one on a scale (for example: I'm slightly mad, very sad, and somewhat afraid).

---

<sup>1</sup>"All Human Behaviour Can Be Reduced to 'four Basic Emotions'" BBC News. Accessed June 04, 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-26019586>.



## 2.3 Alliance

Before beginning any difficult conversation, the group should have a shared understanding of how they will agree to behave when things get hard. And, in a situation like this, they will get hard. A good protocol for designing this shared understanding is a Team Alliance.<sup>2</sup>

### Team Alliance

Help the group design an alliance by asking two questions:

1. What kind of environment would we like to have in order for this process to be successful?
2. What behaviors would help get us back on track when things go awry?

You should walk the team through both phases deliberately. If it helps, give examples of kinds of environments (“Light-hearted,” “compassionate,” “precise,” etc.) that might be helpful, depending on their demeanor. Also, potential examples of corrective behaviors might be helpful (“Take a short break,” “Call out the energy in the room,” etc.).

Pay attention to body language. If it appears the rest of the team doesn’t agree with something someone else said, it’s ok to ask what others think about it. This is not a brainstorm, but a decision-making process. Help the group come to convergence on an agreement they can all live with.

---

<sup>2</sup>Fridjohn, Marita, and Grace Flannery, “Designing the Partnership and Leadership Alliance” (class, Organization and Relationship Systems at Work, Chicago, IL, 2011)

After the group alliance is complete, ask each person to take a few moments and come up with their response to this question: “What personal commitment will each of you make to your team in this meeting?”

### **Facilitator Needs**

You should also make sure to add your own needs. Some which are extremely helpful might include:

- No outside interruptions allowed.
- Laptops, cellphones, and so forth should be left outside or silenced.

## **2.4 Confidentiality**

Remind participants that what is said in the room is confidential. If people (including the Facilitator) want to share something somebody said during this exercise, they should ask permission first.

## 2.5 Direct Experience Practice

The instructions for Direct Experience Practice<sup>3</sup> are as follows:

1. Sit in a chair with your back upright and hands on thighs, slightly forward so your back isn't against the back of the chair.
2. Pay attention to all sensory input until the timer goes off. Sight, sound, texture, smell, etc.
3. If you find your mind wandering, gently bring yourself back to your sensory experience. Try and avoid judging yourself for not being able to stay with your senses.
4. Advanced practitioners can consider their own thoughts as another kind of sensory input.

This practice activates the Direct Experience Network, which is partially responsible for thinking creatively about situations. It is vast in comparison to the other brain regions that might be involved in this situation, such as the Pre-Frontal Cortex (which does logic and reasoning) or the amygdala (which handles emotional / physical threats and rewards).

Generally this practice can go for **3–5 minutes**. Start short, but if the group has done this a couple times, increase the time a bit. You should keep time.

---

<sup>3</sup>Rock, David. "The Neuroscience of Mindfulness." *Psychology Today: Health, Help, Happiness Find a Therapist*. October 11, 2009. Accessed October 29, 2014. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/your-brain-work/200910/the-neuroscience-mindfulness>.

In order to run this practice, simply introduce the group to the practice in your own words. Reminding them that it is completely optional (autonomy, status rewards), invite them to sit upright and pay attention to their sensory experience. Read the instructions above, at a normal pace and volume (this is not a guided meditation), but pause between each sentence.

## **2.6 Listening and Giving Feedback Practice**

This practice is done in multiple phases. Each phase is outlined below.

### **Introduce the Exercise**

The goal here is to grow in listening, not necessarily to help the speaker in any way (though that may be a happy side effect).

## Levels of Listening

Introduce the CDEF model of listening<sup>4</sup>, which are:

1. **Closed** – Not paying attention at all to what the other person is saying.
2. **Downloading** – Listening to the other person just so you can prepare your own response,
3. **Empathizing** – Listening to the other person and trying to understand what is going on for them, and
4. **Fully Engaged** – Listening so hard the speaker has powerful insights all on their own.

Ask for any insights that arise when hearing about these levels of listening. Which levels do they think would be best to use in this exercise?

---

<sup>4</sup>Inspired by Acharya Rosenthal, Eve, “The Relatives” (class, Basic Goodness II, Milwaukee, WI, Oct. 10–12, 2014)

## Speak With Intent

Introduce the SSG model: **Succinct**, **Specific**, and **Generous**; as a great way to give feedback (or any information, for that matter)<sup>5</sup>.

**Succinct** Say as little as possible. Don't make your partner work too hard to understand what you're saying.

**Specific** Don't be vague. Say exactly what you mean to say.

**Generous** Don't hold back. Give all the information there is to give.

It is actually hard to say the smallest amount of words that convey the most information. So don't worry if it takes time to figure out what to say. The recipient of an SSG statement is probably very relieved you took the time to work out what you are trying to say instead of just saying the first thing that pops into your head.

Ask the group what they think about this model. How could it help them here? How could it help them in everyday life? Every so often ask them to reword their statement to be SSG. How does that feel?

---

<sup>5</sup>Rock, David. "Speak With Intent." In *Quiet Leadership: Help People Think Better – Don't Tell Them What to Do: Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work*. New York: Collins, 2006.

## **Person 1 Speaks, while Person 2 Listens**

Now we move directly into practicing with the levels of listening and speaking with intent. Ask people to pair off and choose who should go first. Person 1 should speak for 5 full minutes about the following question: “What kind of team member have I been for the past 3 months?” Person 2 should try to listen from level 3 or 4 (more level 4 listening is better).

After time is up, ring a bell and move to the next step.

## **Person 2 feeds back what they think they heard using SSG**

To prove they were listening (providing a relatedness reward), Person 2 responds back with what they think they heard, and then asks Person 1 how close they were. This also reinforces that the appropriate level of listening was achieved. This should take no more than 2 minutes.

## **Reverse roles and follow the previous two steps**

Everybody should get to practice equally. Encourages fairness.

## **Debrief: How was that for you?**

Everyone should return to their original seats and share, popcorn-style, how that activity was for them. Make sure nobody shares out what their partner told them.

## 2.7 Contemplation of Personal Situation

### Introduction

The act of writing often unlocks memories people are unwilling to face on the surface. Also, writing with a pen helps engage the motor cortex, which is yet another vehicle for creative thinking. This network is very large and gets connected with muscle memory and so forth.

### Instructions

Using pen and paper, encourage participants to write continuously about the same question: “What kind of team member have I been for the past 3 months?” This should go continuously for 5 minutes. No picking up of the pen or stopping writing at all. If people get stuck, they can just write, “I’m stuck” over and over, or something similar.

After 5 minutes, they should read what they wrote and contemplate its impact. This helps cement their own learning.



## 2.8 Expressing Willingness to Receive Feedback

Each person should write down on an index card one or two words in response to the question: “How would I feel after receiving difficult feedback from a team member?” This is anonymous.

The facilitator should collect them, shuffle them, and read them out loud, without commenting or expressing any feelings at all. This helps everyone understand how their information will be received. Also, it may put people into a frame of mind to be more accepting of information.

## 2.9 Feedforward Process

The previous steps of the protocol have been preparing for this process. It is arguably the most difficult part of it all. Much explanation should be done before the process kicks off so that people don't feel any certainty threats.

### Review the Process

Explain each step independently, and make sure to allow space for asking questions about the process. This allows folks to get clarity on what expectations are for each participant.

Your job is to ensure that nobody interrupts the interviewee while they are speaking, and asking the questions exactly as they are worded. That's all.

## Review the Interview Questions

The interview questions are as follows:

1. What did you do well in the past three months?
2. What would you have done differently in the past three months?

## One person volunteers to be interviewed

Remind participants that when they are being interviewed, they are put “on the spot.” This is the most uncomfortable place to be, and they may feel very vulnerable.

This is normal.

If they are able to sit there and not feel vulnerable or threatened in some way, they are truly enlightened.

## Facilitator interviews

Ask the interviewee the interview questions. You should ask one question at a time, and wait until the interviewee has fully finished before moving on to the next question. Thank them after each response, *but do not react in any way*.

## **The rest of the group listens**

Everyone else in the group listens at Level 3 or 4 as you ask the interview questions. This is not a time for them to prepare their responses, but instead to record what they heard. Getting lost in thought or formulating their own response while the interviewee is sharing makes it very likely they'll miss something. Remind them there will be time after the interview to come up with their own responses.

Body language is crucial at this point. If they are open to receiving from the interviewee, their body language will reflect that. If they aren't, it won't. Encourage participants to look up and make eye contact with the interviewee often.

## **Take a short pause for the group to write any reflections**

After the interview, ask the group to take a few moments and reflect on the question: "What would you add to what you heard?" They can feel free to take notes if they like. Remind folks that these thoughts will be used in the feedback process later, so they should do whatever they can to create a reminder for themselves. This should take no longer than 3 minutes.

## **The process repeats until everyone has been interviewed**

This helps people feel like the whole process is fair.

## 2.10 Feedback Process

At this point, the group is primed to give feedback to one another. They've heard what each member on the team has done well and what they would do differently. Reminding participants that the best feedback fits with what someone already knows, ask them to pair off. Much like the listening exercise in Section 2.6, one person will be talking, while the other will be listening.

The speaker is the person giving feedback, while the listener is the one receiving it. The listener should listen intently, and can feel free to take notes as they are doing so.

Once the person giving feedback has spoken for 3 minutes, the facilitator rings a bell (or something similar) and the partners swap. After the first swap, people should find someone they haven't given or received feedback to/from. This part can get kind of chaotic. That's just fine – at this point you should have a very light touch. Don't hold the process too tightly, and use humor generously (if you haven't already).

The whole process ends once everyone has given and received feedback.

## 2.11 Closing

The closing is important for several reasons. First and foremost, it brings a sense of completion to the entire exercise, and an opportunity to recover from what was likely a very high-intensity few hours. Additionally, it cements any learning that people might have had about their own particular insights. Reflecting on an experience tends to reinforce the memory of it.

Practically speaking, this is also a time for the facilitator to learn how to tune the process or their own individual style. It also gives the team a chance to bond with one another in a way that wasn't so easy in the highly structured middle section.

The process is simple:

1. Ask everyone to answer the question, in a round: "How did this go for you?"
2. Don't allow any crosstalk.
3. Close the exercise with a statement of encouragement to the participants.



# Chapter 3

## Summary

This process is likely to be very difficult to facilitate the first time. It requires people on a team to express themselves in ways they were potentially never asked to before. Some may have opted out of participating, while others may have tried but given the facilitator a hard time. This is all very normal.

What's important is following the protocol and allowing the team to become what it needs to become. This is not about forcing someone to get "better;" it is instead about being curious about who they are about to become in response to being held by their peers in unconditional positive regard.

The trick to all this is letting go of any expectations or feeling of responsibility for the outcome. This is a marked difference from traditional feedback mechanisms, which reinforce the faulty conclusion that managers are "better than" the people they serve. These kinds of beliefs cause the worst to come

out in people – from direct rejection of what may have been good ideas, to blind obedience and itinerant loss of any free creative thinking whatsoever.

In following and embracing feedforward, and fully trusting teams to become what they need to, the individuals in them will grow naturally in ways that could never have been predicted. With very little work and a healthy sense of curiosity and wonder could come quite a bit of unexpected benefit.



# Chapter 4

## Modifications

This protocol can be modified due to changing circumstances, depending on the team's level of cohesion, previous application of other sophisticated team-building techniques, and so forth. Here are a couple examples of modifications that have been known to work well:

- When a team has an intact alliance, there is no need to create another one, so Section 2.3 can be skipped.
- If a team is high-performing, and have done this exercise before as an intact team (i.e., every member has had a positive experience of it in the past) then Section 2.8 about willingness to receive feedback, can be skipped.



# Chapter 5

## Standalone Uses

There are multiple parts of this protocol that can be extracted into standalone portions to create overall team. Here are a few:

- This protocol can be distilled to a one-on-one format. Simply:
  1. Ask if the person is willing to receive feedback about an issue. Name the issue briefly.
  2. If they are willing, ask them what they think they did well. Otherwise thank them and end the conversation.
  3. Ask them what they would have done differently.
  4. If you have anything to add, share it.
  5. Ask if anything you added was helpful, and if so, how they would use it.

- The Alliance in Section 2.3 can be used to form a new team, updated to bring in a new team member, or basically any time a large change has occurred.
- Direct Experience Practice, referenced in Section 2.5 is useful as a daily practice and a group practice.
- Any group work can be enhanced with the Levels of Listening and Speak With Intent models in Section 2.6

# Chapter 6

## Thank You

Thank you for your kind attention. This text has been a joy to write. May many multitudes benefit.