Upward feedback: a new power for the learning organisation

It's about feedback and improvement, not judgment or appraisal and simply asks team members whether they want more, less, or the same of their manager over a broad group of behaviors

By Dr Ron Forbes

IF you could run focus groups in your organisation on an annual basis as a matter of course... If these groups were run at every level and in every area... If they led to information, ideas, and action plans... If the groups were in fact teams and managers that could improve... If the information and ideas generated were gathered and put to use... What a power source for a learning organisation!

This wasn't the original aim of the creator of upward feedback, but the spin-offs are being shown as far greater than the original purpose for which it was created (management development).

First, a look at what upward feedback is not:

☐ It is not appraisal.
☐ It is not linked to standardised competencies.
☐ It does not affect your remuneration or go on your record.

So what is it?

☐ It is a way of getting candid and accurate feedback from team to manager.
☐ It is based on how the team perceives the actions of the manager.
☐ It does not judge the manager, but only asks him or her for more, less, or the same of a broad series of behaviors.
☐ It gives equal weight to leadership and management, task and people.
☐ Feedback is confidentially facilitated, first to the manager, then between team and manager.
☐ It also allows comparison between staff, manager, and manager's manager (the "boss"), and brings to light areas of disagreement and misunderstanding — issues that can sometimes be remedied immediately.

The fear of being judged. A crucial feature of upward feedback is that it is not appraisal in another form. This makes receiving feedback from the staff or team more palatable. The process also begins, in most cases, with the CEO or divisional manager leading the way as the first participant. At each level, starting from the top, the senior manager takes the issues to the team, involving it in the solutions. It is soon seen to release a powerhouse of information and ideas not obtained by other means.

The result of this approach is ready acceptance. While managers are often prone to fears ("What will they say about me? Will I look bad? Will it hurt my prospects?"), there is a lot less threat in a system that is defined from the outset as feedback and improvement, not judgment. Once senior managers have opened themselves up to feedback, other managers are more ready to try their hand.

Fear can also enter when team members are asked to give feedback ("Will I be found out if I'm honest?" or "Will I hurt the manager's feelings/career?"). The confidentiality of the system ensures that no individual response can be identified, even though the complete range of responses can be seen. The process even allows for managers to decide how much they share with the team.

Most usually provide full information. This is because once the "boss" (the manager's manager) has shown him/herself willing to learn from their staff, they have taken a first step towards culture change and the managers are ready to follow. Besides, curiosity gets the better of most managers: "How can they say they want *more* teamwork!?", etc. Managers who were moving confidently ahead, sure that they had everything right, now want to meet their teams just to get answers to such questions.

The history. The developer of upward feedback, Peter Farey, was a senior HR manager with British Airways and a part of the team that helped BA become the "World's Favorite Airline". A former CEO of the Air Staff Industry Training Association, Farey was the first in Britain to use upward feedback at the Air Transport Staff College as far back as 1973.

Synthesising and building on 50 years of research, Farey refined his system to ensure that feedback would go beyond present measures of management style (mainly

Figure 1
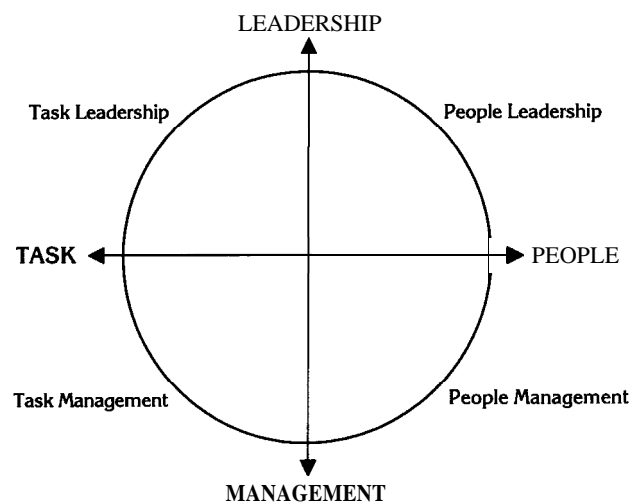
"task" and "relationship" orientation). He sought to incorporate what James MacGregor Burns, the political scientist, called transformational leadership. Burns defined this as looking beyond present constraints, striking out in new directions, taking risks, influencing beliefs and values.

Farey tied in leadership as well as traditional management behaviors (setting goals, strategies, resources, organisation, control, motivating people, etc). In this way he set up the framework for his model. His reasoning was that successful organisations today are those that can generate a culture where all four are present: people leadership, task leadership, people management, and task management.

The Leader/Manager Map. Farey then sorted through his personal collection of 1000 management behaviors regarded as desirable, reducing them to a set of 100 simple statements of management practices that fell neatly into a clockwise sequence around the map. These in turn he grouped into 20 areas of management activity, forming the spokes of the Leader/Manager Map.

Because staff are asked only whether they want "more", "less", or "as now", the leader/manager questionnaire is easy to answer. If a team were to score the questionnaire for a manager who worked "perfectly" with them, they would ask for "continue as now" on each of the practices. The resulting manager's map would be a circle of "no-issue" (figure 1).

In the real world, managers don't work well in every area, and team members can often see these weaker areas that may be blind spots to the manager. Where they want more of a behavior, the map will lie inside the circle; where they want less, the map will cross to outside the circle, as in figure 2 (see page 8).

When the map is read in conjunction with the detailed breakdown of responses provided, it becomes easy to pinpoint areas where change is being requested. From there, a facilitated process with team and manager helps surface the underlying issues, while maintaining team members' confidentiality as far as necessary.

Information, intelligence, and culture. While many of the issues arising require action plans and time to implement, one result that is achieved immediately is openness. A video showing the process at work in a large (20,000 staff) British County Council is aptly titled *Openness in Action.* In it, managers discuss how their feelings changed as they went through the steps. Once team and manager have taken down the barriers, feedback becomes the norm in their relationship.

What is it that powers the learning organisation? Information - the *right* information reaching the *right* point at the *right* time; and intelligence-tapping in to the know-how of each person. Experience with upward feedback shows that the resulting information and intelligence have their impact in four areas:

1. The manager's development.

2. The team — how well members work together and support the manager.

3. The team member — how he/she is supported in their individual tasks.

4. The organisation and its overall ability to lead, manage, and improve.

Outputs and outcomes. The learning organisation benefits from the specific outputs of upward feedback:

1. Individual and team action plans to improve how team and manager work together. These can range from requirements for professional development, to improvements in processes, the quality system, etc.

2. Changes in style and emphasis. Managers often have the skills but aren't using them.

3. Ideas, problems, and suggestions that go beyond the team. This can be important material for more senior management. When collated from a range of teams, it can lead to responsive organisational change through the setting up of cross-functional teams, or be used in process re-engineering.

4. Clearly defined training requirements linked to specific outcomes that the teams are expected to achieve.

5. A smooth negotiated transition to empowerment and to self-management,

where this is the aim in mind.

6. A benchmark is built up in the form of an organisational map plus statistics on how staff, managers, and bosses perceive requirements in the 20 areas of behavior, and even to the level of the 100 practices. This can be measured annually.

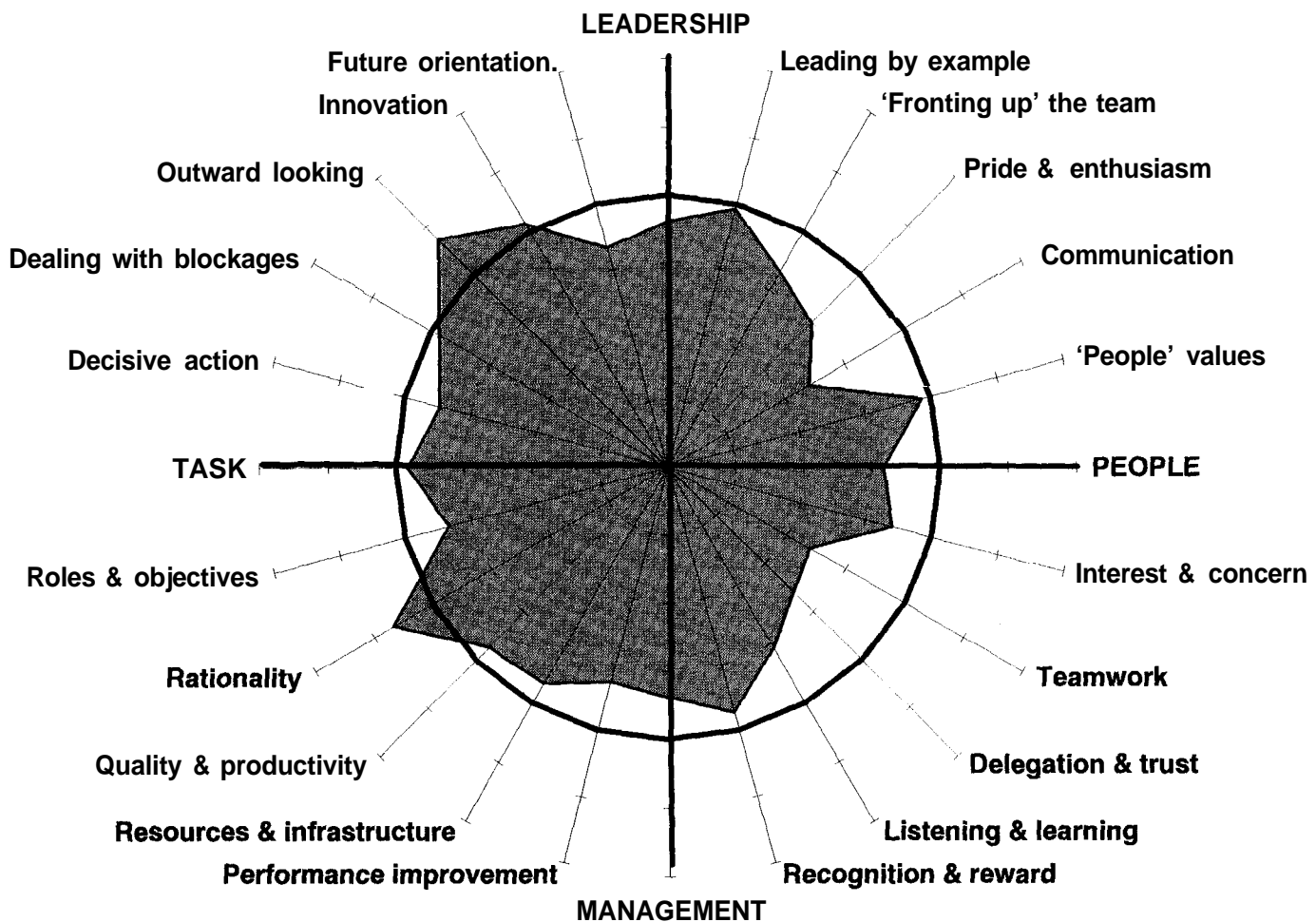7. A more open culture in which all forms of appraisal can be more easily managed.

Measuring change. With enough managers, it is possible for the organisation to measure how it changes. At the same time, comparison is not valid from one manager to another. This is because the map shows the perceived reactions of team to manager at a moment in time. Change the team, you change the result. Once again, the map is not appraisal, it is stimulus to change.

One of the problems with generalised competency assessments is the assumption that every manager must perform well in every area. This, however, is both unlikely to happen and, in practice, unnecessary. What matters is that every manager and team must perform to the optimum required in every area. Hence, manager and team together must work out ways to overcome deficits and improve their map.

Upward feedback does have an impact on management competencies. However, these are not being improved for their own sake, but rather for the purpose of meeting specific needs in performance and teamwork. Which is one of the main thrusts of the Karpin Report   that a major part of a manager's learning can be and should be on the job.

Figure 2: Leader/manager feedback

(The circle indicates what would be the respondent's ideal level)

LEADERSHIP
Future orientation.
Innovation
Leading by example
'Fronting up' the team
Outward looking
Pride & enthusiasm
Dealing with blockages
Communication
Decisive action
'People' values
TASK
PEOPLE
Roles & objectives
Interest & concern
Rationality
Teamwork
Quality & productivity
Delegation & trust
Resources & infrastructure
Listening & learning
Performance improvement
Recognition & reward
MANAGEMENT

Lateral and downward feedback. To take account of the manager who has few or no reports of any kind, Farey has developed an associates/colleagues version of the map that allows them to be part of a wider program. Upward feedback does not canvass the opinions of associates and colleagues for the very good reason that these are not the ones who best know how the manager manages.

Experience shows that peers, looking at the outer appearance, usually have perceptions that are very different from the team's, perhaps softer, or else less concerned, or even of rivalry. Bringing them in can weaken the results and cloud the issues. A manager may tell him/herself "My team really don't know, but my colleagues do".

However, there are exceptions, such as where a group of managers/professionals have very different relationships from those they have with their teams. Farey has developed a 360-degree process with multiple maps for such situations.

Because feedback from the boss (the manager's manager) also represents a perception that is one step removed, it is not given to the participant right away. The manager is first encouraged to come to terms with what he/she thinks the team is saying. Having done this, they are better able to examine the conflict that may exist between what their manager is wanting, and what the team is saying they must have if they are to be successful.

Self-management. For those situations where teams have become largely self-managing, Peter Farey has devised a variation that allows them to gear their development to the same leader/manager model.

Upward feedback creates the leader-manager, people-task culture that is winning in successful organisations today. Upward feedback in Australia and New Zealand is being welcomed by large organisations and some small, in both private and public sectors, as a tool of executive and management development. The additional benefits they are finding are openness, culture change, and a major power source for the learning organisation. *H R M*

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