Assessing feedback interactions in a creative setting

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Feedback - the objective response, opinion, or input - is something most of us experience either at work or amongst friends to bodies of work or projects that are complete. But in the world of creative processes - where no one knows what the finished product should look like - feedback is inherently different, and more constructive, according to new research by a Boston College professor who says the findings should be utilized in the corporate world.

"Traditionally when we think about [feedback](), we think about the manager who knows what an employee's performance should look like; they're able to objectively measure how the employee is doing and kind of agree on how the performance has gone," says Spencer Harrison, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Management and Organization in the Carroll School of Management at Boston College and lead author of the study published in the *Academy of Management Journal*. "But when you're doing something that's inherently creative, the whole point of creativity is you don't know what the outcome is supposed to look like when you're starting off. So now all of a sudden, both worker and feedback provider are in completely different positions than what a classic feedback situation entails, and we just didn't know very much about what that feedback situation should look like. How do people actually guide others down a path when they don't know what the outcome should be, when they're kind of both discovering newness along the way?"

Titled, "An Inductive Study of Feedback Interactions Over The Course

Of Creative Projects," Harrison and co-author Elizabeth Rouse of Boston University, examined a modern dance group along with designers for an award winning research and development department to find out how the creative process is nurtured and encouraged through feedback.

Their data, collected over two years, was compiled from 88 feedback interactions (using audio and video devices), interviews, and focus groups. The researchers found a number of common threads with successful feedback: a creative person's willingness to share incomplete work, the need for a constructive, two way conversations; the desire of feedback providers to really understand the process; and the realization that the two parties are on a journey together.

"It blows apart this myth that for decades, people kind of assumed, 'Well, if you're going to be creative, you need to brainstorm' and one of the rules of brainstorming is you don't judge, you don't criticize, you don't provide feedback basically," says Harrison. "And so people have created in some ways a false aversion to the relationship between feedback and creativity. If you want someone to be creative, the myth is you just leave that person alone, that person will figure it out on their own, and when it's ready, that person will bring you a finished iPhone or a finished whatever the next great product is. The reality is that creative people actually want people to provide input on their ideas - they just want it done in the right way, in a safe environment, in a way that honors what they've done in the past."

Sharing incomplete work and subjecting it to possible ridicule is counterintuitive, but the research found in creative settings, this kind of sharing is quite common because the feedback is focused on developing an idea rather than evaluating it at the end, as the study points out:

"Current theorizing does not focus on feedback directed at 'incomplete work' but instead focuses on feedback directed at the creative worker; it

focuses on feedback as a factor that might motivate individuals' future creative behaviors. This ignores the situation common to creative projects, where the goal of feedback is to enhance the creative idea being reviewed."

Critical to the feedback's success is a conversation between creative workers who are receptive to help, and feedback providers who have done their homework.

"What was really kind of surprising to us was this idea that the feedback starts off with the feedback providers trying to understand what the creative workers are doing and what sort of terrain they've already turned over in figuring out what the product is going to look like," says Harrison, who says these conversations lead to an opportunity where the creative worker admits he/she isn't sure where he/she is headed next.

"It's that moment where they provide an opening for the feedback provider to give some recommendations about where things should go. There is this really interesting dance, no pun intended, that goes on between the feedback provider and the creative worker in trying to understand each other, to make sure they get to a point where the creative worker feels like the feedback providers have done their due diligence to understand where he/she is trying to go with the product and what he/she has already tried.

"A lot of feedback isn't 'This is what you should do,' it's actually 'Where have you been? Where are you going?' and really trying to figure out what people have been thinking about before you ever showed up to assess what it is they are working on."

That time investment and sincere interest on the part of the feedback providers helps create a mutual respect between the two parties that, according to the study, "can positively influence an individual's creative

performance and lead to the generation of more ideas." And just because someone might be in a position to provide feedback doesn't mean he/she has all the answers.

"Exactly," says Harrison. "One of the cool things we see is that a lot of the feedback isn't like, 'You should do this.' It was more open-ended, like 'What would happen if we thought about this this way?' So this fine kind of analogical and metaphorical thinking, the curiosity questions, really spurred the conversations to move things along that way.

"There were moments when we did see people start spewing advice; 'You should do this, you should do that,' and our analysis shows that never really led to big changes in the products people were designing. When feedback providers don't wait for these openings, when they don't understand each other, then the feedback they are giving doesn't seem to be as effective."

While the study demonstrated this approach to be hugely successful in the creative world, Harrison believes there's a place for this feedback in corporate America.

"Any business that sees creativity can help them at some level with their competitive advantage, then what we're finding is really crucial," says Harrison. "Part of the other reason is that for hundreds of years, people have mythologized the creative process as this sort of black box where we don't really understand what's going on, and these sort of feedback meetings where you say, 'Work on it for four weeks and then bring it in and show us, and we'll help you develop this further.' That's one moment where the black box is open, and managers and other employees have an opportunity to kind of help smooth something along, and so organizations really need to take advantage of those moments because if they don't understand that the rules for providing feedback in that moment are very different than the classic rules for performance

evaluations, then they're going to mess those moments up and they're likely to mess up the evolution of that creative product.

"If you have these moments where you can get a lot of eyeballs on it, opening up that black box and revealing 'Here's where we're at, at this point,' and if you understand the rules for how to have that conversation in a developmental way, that's hugely important for people that are trying to leverage creativity to help their businesses grow and be competitive," says Harrison. "If these organizations are not able to create an environment where someone is able to spitball an idea, and they can work with that idea and help a person develop it into something that's useful, then they're missing out on a huge opportunity there that can revitalize their business or give them a new edge strategically or a new customer base to work with."

The study points out that with feedback and creativity both meant to generate change, organizations need to take full advantage of review meetings that are built into creative projects, while employees need to enter with open minds and a desire to completely comprehend what is at hand.

"If you're going to provide feedback to somebody's creative product, I think that you really need to take the time to understand what they're trying to do with it, ideas that they have already gone through to get to that prototype, and where they're going in the future before you just start providing recommendations," says Harrison. "I think as a creative worker, it's being willing to walk into those sorts of meetings with something half-finished and kind of waiting for the opportunity to be open and allow people to provide feedback and constructive criticism of what it is you're doing. Most importantly, organizations have huge opportunity with these sorts of meetings. And my sense is a lot of them are probably blowing it because they don't understand that the rules for providing feedback in that scenario are very different than the rules they

are used to in other scenarios."

Provided by Boston College