

# Informal feedback: We crave it more than ever, and don't care who it's from

June 19 2020, by Nathan Eva, Alex Newman, Hannah Meacham, Tse Leng Tham

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The COVID-19 crisis has [changed the way](#) many of us work. With the switch to working from home, in particular, a fundamental workplace behavior has gone by the wayside: informal feedback.

At the office it is easy to get, and give. But [working from home](#) makes it hard. Every interaction requires dialing a number, typing out a message or scheduling a video meeting. That little bit of extra effort means many of us may not bother, given other demands. Indeed a [survey of 1,001 US employees](#) in April found lack of communication was a common reason 45% said they felt burnt out.

So [feedback](#) is especially essential now.

But how to achieve it?

Traditional management thinking would assume the key source of feedback employees need is from supervisors, and put resources into that.

But this might be the time to change that. Our research shows the same organizational benefits can be achieved through a broader culture of feedback between colleagues, making managerial feedback non-essential.

## **Managers not that important**

Our [study](#) investigated the degree to which two different sources of feedback—manager feedback and colleague feedback—influenced worker's willingness to take on more office tasks.

To do so, we surveyed 300 employees and their 64 managers three times over three months in late 2018.

In the first month, employees rated the level of performance and developmental feedback they got from their managers and colleagues, using a "Likert scale" of one to five, one being strong disagreement and five strong agreement. For example, they were asked: "My co-workers

provide me with valuable information about how to improve my job performance."

In the second month, employees rated their [work engagement](#) and whether their feedback expectations were being met. These expectations are part of what researchers call the "[psychological contract](#)" between an individual and an organization—[personal beliefs](#) about the reciprocal obligations between the worker and the workplace.

In the third month, we asked the employees' direct managers to report on any extra tasks those employees had taken on over the past quarter. We asked them to assess if the employee was innovative, such as "creating new ideas" and "transforming the ideas into innovative applications". We also asked how they helped others, such as "giving their time to help others who have work-related problems."

Our hypothesis was that receiving high levels of manager feedback would be associated with high scores on these measures.

The results of our analyzes did show feedback from managers was important. It increased [employee](#) engagement [by about 13%](#).

Unexpectedly, however, our results also showed managerial feedback wasn't any more important than feedback from colleagues.

That is, employees who rated feedback from managers low but feedback from colleagues high scored just as well on the engagement scores from their managers.

So the source of feedback did not matter, so long as it was there.

## **Decentralizing feedback**

Our results are in line with research showing the best feedback [for fostering innovation](#) comes from a source that understands the work, is [immediate](#) and [frequent](#).

They show the potential of decentralized work cultures to pick up the slack when conditions, such as working from home, mean workers aren't having their [psychological contract](#) fulfilled by managers.

Promoting an organization-wide culture of constructive and supportive feedback is even more important to overcome the hurdles in remote working to getting enough informal feedback.

It will take leadership from the top, and bottom.

But you can do it. And we think someone should, informally, tell you that.

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