Narrative 5
"I Know How I'm Doing and How to Get Even Better"

"Feedback is the breakfast of champions," according to management expert and author Ken Blanchard. In fact, feedback is a key contributor to work engagement and is important to everything we've discussed so far (Bakker et al., 2013; Oldham, 2011). It enhances work-related meaningfulness by affirming that our work matters—that our work is not just a shredder-bound word puzzle or a Lego robot destined for disassembly. Feedback also helps communicate that we matter. When conveyed respectfully, feedback signals that we're valued and valuable. We're worth investing in and developing. It also helps fuel the growth cycle that builds confidence and mastery. Proper feedback fosters learning, which increases our sense of competence (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). On the other hand, lack of feedback is consistently tied to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

Feedback: The breakfast of champions.

It turns out that the old adage that "no news is good news" is a horrible motivation tactic. The psychological experience of **"I know how I'm doing and how to get even better"** is critical to lawyers' work engagement. To help develop this experience, we'll focus on two strategies:

1. **Give Regular Feedback Using the 80-20 Rule:** Follow negative feedback with a pile of genuine, positive feedback to circumvent lawyers' psychological immune systems to criticism.

2. **Give Plenty of Positive Recognition:** Regularly use informal recognition to direct lawyers' attention to what they're doing well and to positively reinforce it.

1. Give Regular Feedback Using the 80-20 Rule

Some type of feedback—positive or negative—is necessary to identify what good things followers should continue doing, identify what needs correction, and to communicate that the work was not a futile waste of time. But, while it's easy to give positive feedback, it can be a major challenge to effectively deliver negative feedback—which most often is ignored and can actually harm motivation. Below, I offer research-based strategies to help cultivate the benefits of feedback while limiting many of the pitfalls.

The Negative Impact of Typical Performance Evaluations

A common form of feedback in law firms is the annual performance review. If you listen closely every fall, you'll hear the collective groan of lawyers all over the country as performance review season descends upon them. The aversion to this annual ritual is understandable. The review process often is a time-guzzler for partners and anxiety-inducing for associates. And whether there's a positive return on the investment is in serious question. For example, a national survey found that 87 percent of employees and managers believed that performance reviews are useless and ineffective (Williams, 2012). A scientific review of studies of over 600 feedback processes found that many were ineffective while 30 percent were *destructive* to performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996).

The problems with the traditional appraisal process are no secret—if you Google the phrase "performance reviews harm performance," you'll get over 11 million hits. But most firms still stick with it. A growing number of organizations, such as Lear, Deloitt, Disney, Atlassian, and Accenture, however, are scrapping their annual performance appraisal processes in favor of a more individualized coaching approach. That's unlikely to happen at most law firms soon, making it more practical to focus on ways to tweak the current systems to minimize negative effects of performance evaluations.

Our Immunity to Negative Feedback

Most lawyers want to improve and, to do so, want honest feedback. But we also have a powerful competing impulse to defend our self-worth against threats (Neville & Roulin, 2016). This may be especially true for lawyers, many of whom, according to personality research, are highly sensitive to criticism (Richard, 2002; MacEwan, 2013). Additionally, it's even more likely for egos to get wrapped up in the intellectually complex and creative work that lawyers do.

These competing motives of self-improvement and self-protection can be viewed as part of a "psychological immune system" that protects our sense of self-worth and well-being (Neville & Roulin, 2016). We use defensive strategies to ignore, dismiss, or discount critical feedback. The result is that we flush most negative feedback down the toilet, and our growth may be stunted because of it.

Will any kind of negative feedback survive the psychological immune system? Research suggests that we generally will accept and act on critical feedback when our overall self-worth is bolstered and we're reminded that we're capable and valued in other areas (Neville & Roulin, 2016). But a simple balancing of positive and negative feedback will not be enough. As discussed above, bad is stronger than good—which means negative feedback will swamp positive feedback.

To maximize the chance of success, we should educate partners and other supervising lawyers to engage their teams through a strengths-based approach—one that emphasizes strengths while managing weaknesses. This approach has the potential to avoid the negative effects of deficit-focused feedback and contribute to better performance (Aguinis et al., 2012). This doesn't mean that firms should ignore weaknesses; the question is how best to strike the right balance to develop an optimally performing firm. To get started on tweaking your current process to incorporate a strengths focus, begin with the following science-backed recommendations.

Foster a Developmental Culture through Growth Mindset and Psychological Safety

Above, we learned about the growth mindset and psychological safety strategies for fostering learning, growth, and confidence. These same strategies will cultivate a development culture that fosters a greater openness to negative feedback. As discussed in Narrative #3, people with fixed mindsets believe that ability and

intelligence are mostly static. As a result, they tend to fear feedback because it may suggest that they have an irreparable flaw. Their inner voices tell them, "I must be dumb," rather than "I haven't mastered this yet and will try harder."

The self-protection instinct will be intensified in psychologically unsafe cultures that demand perfection. On the other hand, people with growth mindsets—who are oriented toward learning—are more likely to seek and integrate feedback (Whitaker & Levy, 2012). Additionally, growth mindset leaders are more likely to provide developmental coaching and to fairly evaluate improvement. Accordingly, developing cultures that foster growth mindsets and psychological safety will contribute to a greater openness to negative feedback. (For more ideas for building a strengths-oriented culture in law firms, see Brafford, 2014.)

Start with a Feedforward Interview

Another strategy to bypass the psychological immune system is to supplement or replace traditional performance review meetings with feedforward interviews (FFIs). Rather than focusing only on "what's wrong," FFIs ask, "What went right?" They ask about positive aspects of work and success stories and they have multiple benefits. They are able to:

- Help identify conditions that can support high performance in the future;
- Enhance lawyers' confidence; and
- Trigger positive emotions, making lawyers more open to feedback and change.

Multiple studies have found that FFIs are better than traditional feedback in a number of ways. Compared with traditional feedback, FFIs spur:

- Better performance,
- Enhanced interpersonal relationships,
- Improved self-efficacy,
- Better goal attainment, and
- Decreased defensiveness to feedback. (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; Budworth et al., 2014; Kluger & Nir, 2010; McDowall et al., 2014)

To conduct an FFI, start the meeting by asking lawyers to describe a specific positive situation that occurred during the review period when they felt

that they were at their best. Then explore what circumstances were involved, how those circumstances differ from a less-successful situation, and how the conditions in the success story might be replicated in the future. Actively listen and discuss the strengths involved in the event and how they might be leveraged for future success. Include an interactive goal-setting component to help identify and clarify aspirations and expectations moving forward (Kluger & Nir, 2010). To celebrate successes, consider organizing a social get-together to share and celebrate some of the positive stories shared during the FFI meetings.

Deliver Negative Feedback Carefully

Recommending FFIs does not imply that constructive or "negative" feedback isn't necessary. It definitely is—the more specific, the better. The more detailed, complete, and useful the feedback is, the more likely it will boost motivation and be integrated into performance (Whitaker & Levy, 2012). Further, most people really want constructive feedback so that they can improve, even when it's hard to hear (Carmichael, 2014). It also can aid diversity efforts. Research reflects that feedback given to women—whether positive or negative—is vaguer than that given to men. Men are more likely to get a clearer picture of what they're doing well and more-specific guidance on what's needed to advance (Corell & Simard, 2016).

But, given negative feedback's potentially destructive side effects, it must be carefully delivered. When weaknesses must be discussed, strive to counteract the bad with a lot of good. One expert suggests giving three pieces of positive feedback for every negative piece of feedback (Aguinis et al., 2012). Another frames it as an 80/20 rule, in which 80 percent of the conversation focuses on strengths (Cooperrider, 2012). You get the idea. It's important to pile on the positive to offset the outsized influence of the negative. This doesn't mean you should make up praise or dilute the constructive feedback by interweaving compliments. It's important to be genuine and candid or followers may feel manipulated or confused (Carmichael, 2014).

Setting clear goals for improvement also is important for motivation and engagement (Kahn, 1990; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Delivering criticism without clear guidance for improvement is more likely to crush motivation than bolster it. Goals should be challenging but achievable and not beyond the follower's capacity.

While effective leaders express high expectations, they also convey high confidence in followers' ability to meet them. Expressing confidence has two important effects. First, it helps boost the competence need under self-determination theory (SDT) and the sense of self-efficacy—which, as discussed earlier in Part II, are important for performance and engagement. Second, for minority lawyers, negative feedback can activate conscious or unconscious beliefs that they're being treated adversely because they're minorities—which can trigger psychological effects that harm performance (Cohen et al., 1999). Leaders can help prevent these negative effects by setting high standards while also authentically communicating confidence in their followers' ability to meet them.

Effective feedback is delivered as part of a two-way communication (Luthans & Stajkovic, 2009). Leaders delivering feedback should:

- Ask questions.
- Spend time listening.
- Be empathetic.
- Focus on behavior rather than the person's worth.
- Link negative feedback to specific knowledge or skills (which can change) rather than talents or traits.

The popular book *Crucial Conversations* by Kerry Patterson and her colleagues is a good guidebook for effectively communicating constructive feedback. Carefully managing this process is essential given evidence that performance feedback often is bungled, which harms well-being and performance.

Meet Often with Each Lawyer

Just because your firm has an annual review process doesn't mean you should wait until next year's annual review to coach your team. Feedback should be timely and regular (Luthans & Stajkovic, 2009). Research reflects that ignoring or ostracizing people is toxic and produces the worst outcomes—even worse than focusing on weaknesses or other forms of negative attention (O'Reilly et al., 2014; Sorenson, 2014). Author and counselor Hugh Prather said, "Negative feedback is better than none. I would rather have a man hate me than overlook me. As long as he hates me I make a difference." I don't mean to encourage negativity or hatred here, but to emphasize how important it is to periodically feel acknowledged. The message we can easily infer from silence or being ignored is that we don't matter—a message that is destructive to engagement.

Research also shows that feedback that is frequent, directed toward clear goals, continually identifies improvement over prior performance, and acknowledges progress toward goals is the most energizing and most likely to improve performance. To implement these findings, schedule 10-minute weekly meetings with each lawyer about ongoing projects. Ask: "What are you working on?" and "How can I help?" (Bruzzese, 2015). Schedule monthly meetings with the entire team to discuss the big picture, review and revise goals, and celebrate successes.

↻ Questions for Self-Reflection about Giving Regular Feedback Using the 80-20 Rule

The psychological experience that **"I know how I'm doing and how to get even better"** is critical to lawyers' work engagement. Feedback contributes to a sense that our work matters, we matter, and that we're growing and capable. However, people are sensitive to negative feedback and might screen it out completely if it's not delivered carefully and packaged in positivity.

- What practices do you and your firm currently use to provide feedback?
- Do you give enough feedback? Do you avoid giving feedback or receiving feedback because it makes you uncomfortable? What can you do to overcome that discomfort? Are more efforts needed to bolster psychological safety and growth mindsets?
- When you give feedback, do you emphasize progress and mastery more than weaknesses? If you tend toward negative feedback, what practices could you adopt to ensure that you include more positive feedback?
- Would you consider trying the feedforward process? What else could you do? Do you keep a log to remember good things to convey to other lawyers?
- Other than the annual performance review process, when do you provide feedback? Do you meet with lawyers regularly? Do you emphasize the progress being made in their individual goals and team and firm goals? Can you create a checklist to remind you to think about various areas of progress to highlight regularly?

2. Give Plenty of Positive Recognition

Apart from formal feedback, informal positive recognition should be given as much as possible—so long as it's authentic and warranted. It boosts positive emotions and is critical to maintaining what scholars call the effort-reward balance. Research shows that stress spikes and motivation drops when people perceive an imbalance in the effort they contribute compared to their rewards (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The chronic combination of high effort and low rewards foments feelings of unfairness and lack of reciprocity in work relationships (Rydstedt et al., 2007). It undercuts the basic need for efficacy and competence. It also is a risk factor for cardiovascular health, subjective health, mild psychiatric disorders, and burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

While money is an important type of reward and feedback, it's by no means all that matters in the effort-reward calculus. Intangible rewards like esteem and social rewards also are very important. These include things like respect, recognition for good work, fairness, support, and not being ignored. Intrinsic rewards of the job also play a role, such as feeling proud of the importance of our work or the positive impact it has on others (Allisey et al., 2012; Allisey et al., 2016; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Research shows that strategies aimed at increasing intangible rewards like recognition and a respectful culture are likely to increase followers' mental health and organizational functioning. Intangible rewards can have comparable or stronger effects on psychological health and behavior (e.g., absenteeism) than monetary rewards (Allisey et al., 2016; Allisey et al., 2012). One study of followers' preferences for expressions of appreciation found that they preferred verbal, one-on-one communications even more than monetary bonuses (Beck, 2016).

Positive feedback like recognition and gratitude are forms of intrinsic reward that weigh heavily in the effort-reward balance. Informal recognition is a form of feedback that communicates a genuine acknowledgment, approval, and appreciation for work well done (Luthans & Stajkovic, 2009). The similar concept of workplace gratitude is a heartfelt communication that notices and acknowledges a person's value and significance (Beck, 2016). Workplace

cultures that are permeated with recognition and gratitude are associated with well-being and job satisfaction. Further, people may be able to handle a greater workload if they value the work, feel they are doing something important, or if they feel well rewarded for their efforts (Maslach et al., 2001).

Though simple, this type of recognition can have a powerful impact. One of my own memorable examples happened when I was a senior associate. After doing a complex project that was way outside my comfort zone for a very senior, very well respected, very scary partner, I received a handwritten note in the office mail from him. The note stated simply that my work was excellent and he never would have known that the project was outside my area of expertise. I smiled for days and felt that my hard work had been worthwhile. And I probably still have that note stashed away somewhere.

> *Recognition and gratitude can have a powerful impact.*

I'm sure we can all think of similar examples where we felt a positive jolt when someone we respect took a moment to recognize our work. So why don't we do it for others more frequently? This form of reward is cheap and readily available for use, and few followers ever receive too much of it (Luthans & Stajkovic, 2009). It's most powerful when given by someone with some degree of authority or someone we respect (Beck, 2016; Luthans & Stajkovic, 2009).

Notably, though, the positive effects of recognition depend on perceived fairness, sincerity, and the level of personalization. If everyone on a team is recognized or thanked when only a few worked hard for the success, or when important contributors are overlooked, the negative reactions to these disparities are likely to outweigh any positive gain (Beck, 2016). When given fairly and sincerely, recognition and gratitude build trust, generate a sense of belonging, and make people more likely to stay (Beck, 2016). Given all the benefits of this inexpensive and easy tool to enhance work engagement, there's no reason not to start doing more of it now.

↻ *Questions for Self-Reflection about Positive Recognition*

Giving plenty of positive recognition will help build lawyers' psychological experience that **"I know how I'm doing and how to get even better."** It draws

lawyers' attention to those things that they're doing well, and it provides positive reinforcement so that they continue to do them.

- How often do you give positive recognition for lawyers' work and firm contributions? What practices can you adopt to ensure that you do it more often?
- How can you encourage others at the firm to give more positive recognition?