How to implement a feedback culture in your newsroom

By Morten Frich

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Introduction

Speaking at an annual convention of The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) in Washington, Linda Grist Cunningham, executive editor of the *Trenton Times*, N.J., reported the findings from ASNE's human resource survey:

"Although we appear a happy bunch, there is a strong undercurrent that threatens to become a tidal wave: our staff are demanding, perhaps more than ever before, that we communicate with them. They fault us in overwhelming numbers for our failure to provide clear, consistent direction, for our failures to provide feedback and more than adequate management."[1]

Of newsroom staffers surveyed that year, 85% said their bosses were poor personnel managers, failed to encourage or criticise constructively, and were weak on assignments and decisions.

Cunningham served as a Pulitzer Prize judge several times and was known nationally for her work in management and leadership training. She went on to say: "The demand from our staff for feedback is so insistent and so clearly a top priority that we will tread on dangerous ground if we ignore it."

This was in 1988 – more than 30 years ago.[2] It was before the digital revolution and its rapid transformations of the market and newsrooms; before the war for talent in Generations X, Y and Z; before diversity, inclusion and #MeToo became a priority, and long before hybrid-work and COVID-19.

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[1] Garneau, G., 1988. An Undercurrent of Unhappiness. Editor & publisher. Vol.121 (17), p. 30

[2] In 2019, ASNE merged with the Associated Press Media Editors to become the News Leaders Association. Linda Grist Cunningham retired in 2011. After retiring Cunningham launched Key West Watch Media, a website that manages social media and creates online marketing for small businesses. Part of Key West Watch Media, Key West Island News publishes original content and aggregates news from local Florida news organisations.

For over three decades, newsroom managers have been struggling to get feedback right – with detrimental effects on performance, motivation and innovation. This paper explores how it might be done, looking into literature and at best practices in Silicon Valley and the news industry, to answer two questions:

- How can management harness a culture of feedback in newsrooms?
- How does feedback specifically help newsrooms come up with distinct new and better solutions relevant to targeted audiences?

Frictions can help explain the difficulty of feedback in newsrooms. This paper proposes how to mitigate these frictions and outlines a roadmap to a culture of rigorous and direct feedback, and making feedback fast and frequent.

This paper is not, and should not be read as, an academic paper; it's a journalistic paper, based on a review of literature, my own interviews and a case study during my three months of studying as a Journalist Fellow at the Reuters Institute.

What is feedback?

Broadly speaking, feedback can be defined as information communicated to a person that is intended to modify his or her thinking or behaviour so they may better perform a task or improve learning.[3] The basic function of feedback – dubbed "fierce conversations" by Susan Scott (2017) and "radical candor" by Kim Scott (2017) – is to interrogate reality, provoke learning, tackle tough challenges and enrich relationships.[4]

While there is growing evidence of the benefits of a strong culture of rigorous, direct feedback in successful businesses, this concept has also been challenged. The three specific problems: feedback givers don't assess weaknesses correctly; feedback receivers are not like empty vessels who need to be filled up by co-workers or managers to see their weaknesses; and great performance cannot be simply transferred from one person to another.

The most powerful feedback might simply be impromptu: when a team is doing great work, stop to let them know why this behaviour is specifically good.[5]

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[3] My definition. Winnie and Butler (1994) defined feedback as "information with which a learner can confirm, add to, overwrite, tune, or restructure information in memory, whether that information is domain knowledge, meta-cognitive knowledge, beliefs about self and tasks, or cognitive tactics and strategies". Hattie and Timperley (2007) simply stated: "Feedback is information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one's performance or understanding".

[4] It could even be seen as a philosophy as in this quote from John Stuart Mill: "The source of everything respectable in man either as an intellectual or as a moral being [is] that his errors are corrigible. He is capable of correcting his mistakes, by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone. There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted." Mill (1998)

[5] Buckingham, M., and Goodall, A., 2019. The Feedback Fallacy. Harvard Business Review, Vol 92 (2), pp.92-101.

Co-workers crave feedback and want corrective feedback – even more than praise, if it's provided in a constructive manner.[6] By roughly a three-to-one margin, in fact, they believe it does even more to improve their performance than positive feedback.

When asked what was most helpful in their career, fully 72% said they thought their performance would improve if their managers would provide corrective feedback. But their leaders often don't feel comfortable offering it up. The ability to give corrective feedback constructively is one of the critical keys to leadership – an essential skill to boost your team's performance that could set you apart.

High-need-to-achieve-people may need clear, timely and actionable feedback – even more than the rest of the population – to stay motivated, to learn and grow and to perform at their best without "flat spots".[7]

The paradox is that because leaders tend to be high achievers themselves, they are not disposed to give feedback. They tend to be impatient with everything that distracts them from the real work of getting from A to B. But their real job is not just to plan, manage time and projects; it's also to manage people – to ask for feedback and give feedback.

Quantifying the effect of feedback is hard. Despite research on the topic of knowledge and skill acquisition, the specific mechanisms relating feedback to learning are murky, with few general conclusions. However, two major meta-studies on empirical research do suggest that formative feedback has a moderate to moderate-high effect on student learning: Hattie & Timperley (2007) and

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[6] Zenger, J. and Volkmann, J., 2014: Your employees want the negative feedback, you don't want to give. Harvard Business Review. Available at:
https://hbr.org/2014/01/your-employees-want-the-negative-feedback-you-hate-to-give
[Accessed 28. March 2022]
[7] Delong, T., Gabarro, J. and Lees, R.; 2007. When professionals have to lead. Harvard Business School Press.

Wisniewski et al. (2019).[8,9] Overall results based on a random-effects model indicate a medium effect (d = 0.48) of feedback, but with huge variations. The studies suggest that feedback has rightly become a focus of teaching research and practice. However, these meta-studies also point to the need to interpret different forms of feedback as independent measures. Task-based feedback seems particularly effective.[10] Feedback can even be harmful under some circumstances and lead to creative mortification as well as creative mollification.[11]

Inside newsrooms, formal feedback typically comes in the form of performance reviews once or twice a year, evaluations at the end of larger projects, a daily or weekly email from management and orally by editors at morning meetings.[12] Feedback is an important part of (good) copy editing, and in recent years, real time audience data and dashboards are increasingly becoming a part of journalists' and editors' daily routines.[13]

Informal feedback happens at editorial and business meetings every day. It happens in teams: from manager to employee, from employee to manager, and peer-to-peer. The "would-you-read-my draft" to a colleague is actively soliciting feedback. It can be offered directly by the unhappy customer calling to let you know about a mistake in the daily crossword. Informal feedback happens in text messages, emails, on WhatsApp or Slack, Teams and Zoom, in open office spaces as well as in the cubicles.

[8] Hattie, J. and Timperley, H., 2007. The Power of Feedback. Review of Educational Research, 77(1), pp.81-112.

[9] Wisniewski, B; Zierer, K and Hattie, J., 2019. The Power of Feedback Revisited: A Meta-Analysis of Educational Feedback Research. Frontiers in psychology, Vol. 10, p.3087-3087

[10] For a full literature review on feedback in educational sciences, see Shute (2008)

[11] Holinger, M. and Kaufman, J. 2018. The Relationship between Creativity and Feedback in Lipnevich, A. and Smith, J. (Eds), The Handbook of Instructional Feedback, chapter 26. Cambridge University Press

[12] Rimestad, L., 2016. Encouraging and inhibiting idea development at morning meetings in the newsroom. University of Southern Denmark. [online] Rimestad.dk. Available at: <https://www.rimestad.dk/onewebmedia/Rimestad%20phd%20final.pdf> [Accessed 17 January 2022].

[13] Petre, C., 2021. All the News That's Fit to Click: How Metrics Are Transforming the Work of Journalists. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

It happens at the coffee machine. It can take anything from hours to 15 seconds. It can be a long and heated discussion; it can be the shrug of a shoulder.

Editors and managers might have had some rudimentary training in feedback, though this cannot be taken for granted. Sometimes corporate feedback training will advocate for a magic ratio between praise and criticism, and undoubtedly you will have met "the feedback sandwich" (opening and ending with praise, sticking the criticism in between).

Few editors and managers have been effectively trained in feedback, for example, through roleplay and feedback on their feedback style.

In literature, there are no quantitative and very few qualitative studies on feedback in newsrooms. While Lucy Kueng (2020) suggests that industry leaders have become increasingly aware of the need for a culture of feedback, her study also suggests that feedback is seriously lacking.[14]

Extracts from her focus group dialogue with anonymous industry leaders are alarming: "I have never been in a newsroom that actually has a feedback culture," said one. "I have never had an employee saying feedback is excellent." And, "I have never had an employee saying that there is enough feedback."

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[14] Kueng, L., 2020. Hearts and Minds: Harnessing Leadership, Culture and Talent to Really Go Digital. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/hearts-and-minds-harnessing-leadership-culture-and-talent-really-go-digital> [Accessed 17 January 2022].

Kueng's findings are consistent with studies based on observation with transcriptions of word exchanges between trainees and editors struggling to give formative feedback.[15,16, 17] Though these qualitative studies are few and limited in scope, they do suggest that if the industry wants to harness a culture where feedback doesn't just happen on occasion but is frequent and of high quality, there is – to put it mildly – work to be done.

And, while a culture of feedback is not unique to Silicon Valley, through its constant search and testing of new ideas and better ways, it has changed the conversation on feedback. For this reason, the model that follows is partly inspired by lessons taken from them.

[15] Gravengaard, G. and Rimestad, L., 2014. Socializing Journalist Trainees in the Newsroom: On How to Capture the Intangible Parts of the Process. [online] Sciendo.com. Available at: <https://www.sciendo.com/article/10.2478/nor-2014-0105> [Accessed 17 January 2022].
[16] Rimestad, L., 2016. Encouraging and inhibiting idea development at morning meetings in the newsroom. University of Southern Denmark. [online] Rimestad.dk. Available at: <https://www.rimestad.dk/onewebmedia/Rimestad%20phd%20final.pdf> [Accessed 17 January 2022].
[17] Ivask, S., 2019. Communication between editors and reporters: Feedback and coaching in Estonian dailies' newsrooms". Komejournal.com. Available at: <http://komejournal.com/files/KOME_SI_Estonian%20dailies'%20newsrooms.pdf> [Accessed 17 January 2022].

A better way: How to feedback

Distinctive cultures of rigorous and direct feedback play a prominent role in how successful organisations like Amazon, Netflix, Apple, and Google, but also organisations like McKinsey and Goldman operate.[18]

Google's internal data has shown that the number one characteristic of great leaders, as identified by employees, is their ability to give frequent and transparent feedback. Proactive feedback practices were unexpectedly rated by associates as more important and influential than leadership experience and technical knowledge.[19]

Kim Scott's writing demonstrates how these companies now have systems for direct and rigorous feedback that can help teams come up with new and better solutions, promoting a step-by-step approach on how to guide teams to get results.[20] This concept is based on the idea that relationships, not power, are what move organisations and people forward.

First, a manager needs to create a culture of guidance (praise and criticism) that will keep everyone moving in the right direction; second, a manager needs to understand what motivates each member of the team to avoid burnout or boredom and keep the team cohesive; and, third, to drive results cohesively. Easier said than done, right?

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[18] Denning, S., 2019: Three Problems With The Feedback Model At Work. [online] Forbes.com Available at:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/stephaniedenning/2019/02/28/three-problems-with-the-feedback-model-at-work/?sh=2059b7ab5bc9> [Accessed 9 February 2022].
[19] Baker, A., Perrault, D., Reid, A. and Blanchard, C., 2013. Feedback and organizations: Feedback is good, a feedback-friendly culture is better. Canadian Psychology, Vol. 54, No. 4, 260-268.
[20] Kim Scott is a well-known CEO-coach in Silicon Valley. She was a member of the faculty at Apple University and before that worked at Google, where she led AdSense, YouTube and DoubleClick teams. Earlier in her career, she was co-founder and CEO of a software startup.

On the most basic level, feedback could be hugely improved by following just three steps:

1) describe the situation you see,

2) describe the behaviour you see, neutrally, whether this behaviour is good or bad,

3) and describe the impact you see.

Being specific is key. Instead of saying, "I'm thankful for your contribution to the conversation this morning", try this: 'Thank you for your feedback in this morning meeting *(situation)*. The way you talked about our decision to dig up new and more diverse sources was persuasive *(behaviour)*. Especially because you showed everyone that you heard the other point of view *(impact)*."

Ultimately, as a fourth step, you may offer some explicit guidance for follow up and future behaviour: "I would love to have you in the group who makes the suggestions for actions to bring us closer to our goal of diversifying sourcing *(guidance)*."

As with any conversation, you need to establish rapport first. Being clear about your intentions, often stating them, is a good start: are you offering input, advice, a proposition, wish, request, ordering or outright demanding something? An example: "I'm going to describe a problem I see. I may be wrong and, if I am, I hope you tell me. If I'm not, I hope my bringing it up will help you fix it." On the other end of the scale: "We need to get this done now. You may disagree, but let me explain to you why this is important, and why I'm telling you to do this right away."

Do not pass any judgements and be especially careful not to fall into the trap of the personal attribution error. A manager, editor or journalist may think they know that a co-worker is a procrastinator or a perfectionist, but this assumption may also be wrong. Also, who are we to judge people like that? Passing judgements or attributing behaviour to personality will set you up for failure. You can't change

people, but you can help them change behaviour. Not only should we not make these assumptions, it's also our job to challenge the assumptions our co-workers make about themselves: "I'm a procrastinator", "I'm a perfectionist"... "No, you are not. However, you do sometimes procrastinate or show a perfectionist behaviour. Would it be helpful to you to have a conversation about how to change this behaviour?"

Nobody likes unsolicited or untimely advice. Ask yourself if this is the right time, place and channel for feedback. In person is usually better than on the phone or in writing. Praise can be given publicly, criticism should, if possible, be given privately.

Giving impromptu guidance can be very effective and makes it easier to be specific when describing the situation, behaviour and impact. So don't save feedback for the 1:1 or performance review. Say it in two to three minutes between meetings. Keep slack time in your calendar or be willing to be late to a meeting.

The point is that offering guidance a week, a day or maybe just an hour after the fact can make it impossible to fix the problem or build on the success. Waiting for a better time can make an incident blow up in a way that makes you look weak, or harms the relationship. Silence is rarely the best option.

Remember to be realistic, too: am I asking for something that is not feasibly possible due to the time frame? Are you asking for a wedding cake where you should be asking for a muffin?

There are two prerequisites for enhancing feedback: the manager has to care personally. It's not enough to care only about people's ability to perform a job. To have a good relationship, you have to be your whole self and care for each of the people who work for you as a human being. Caring personally is necessary to establish a rapport, building trust and psychological safety.

Caring personally won't do the trick alone, though. The other dimension of feedback is telling people when their work isn't good enough – and when it is. Challenging directly might seem like a good way to offend people and the opposite of caring personally. Actually, it is not. Challenging directly comes from the belief in the potential of people and the potential in news organisations to transform from good to great.

Fig. 1: The Feedback Checklist
1. Am I clear about my intentions?
2. Is this the time and place?
3. Am I prepared well enough to specifically describe the situation, behaviour and impact?
4. Have I interrogated my own assumptions?
5. Am I being realistic with this person?

Source: This checklist has been made by comprising p. 167-168, Scott, S.
(2017) and p. 136-138, Scott, K. (2019)

According to Kim Scott these two prerequisites – caring personally and challenging directly – are also the two problems that make a lot of feedback flawed. Managers tend to be either so full of empathy that they ruin feedback with manipulative insincerity or they misplace challenging for obnoxious aggression. Instead of offering clear and honest guidance, managers end up going from meeting to meeting just trying to be nice or front-stabbing. She recommends two simple remedies: "Just say it! Give a damn!"

The business advantage of feedback

Unlike Silicon Valley, the news industry has seemed to struggle to come up with distinct new digital solutions for real problems and targeted audiences. While pivots to first video and then audio could be seen as evidence of an agile industry, the opposite is probably more true: the industry, born in the age of print and later broadcast publishing, tends to react to changes in audience behaviour rather than shaping future behaviour.

There are many reasons for this, not all of them bad. For a start: contrary to popular belief, editors and managers were promoted in a culture where it's better to be right than first.

Over lunch, a senior leader in the industry pondered this question: "It is such a strange thing: You have these amazing people who became journalists because they are curious and want to explore things. However, once in the trade, their ability to be curious and come up with new ways to meet audiences' needs evaporates."

Another industry leader approached the same question from a slightly different angle: "Why is it, whoever I hire with new skills, fresh ideas and knowledge, almost everybody ends up thinking and acting like any male, 50-year-plus, print reporter?"

Of course, this is not the whole truth on the matter: journalists and editors *are* curious, they *do* want to explore and engage with audiences in new and interesting ways. That's why they still come up with amazing new ways to tell stories combining text, data, audio and video in a digital world; they do write informative newsletters that bring in vital leads for their organisations; develop new formats like podcasts and live-journalism; become part of a much broader conversation and community in

new membership models and are, in some instances showing strong results, changing from advertising revenue to subscriptions.

However, it is also true that paying attention and listening to audiences – really listening – is an underdeveloped skill in newsrooms that might help explain why we also struggle to come up with new ideas and ways to meet audience needs. Have you ever been to a party full of journalists, editors and managers? Everybody wants to talk; nobody listens. We don't practise listening enough. It's almost a lost art.

The business of news, at its core, is about understanding audiences and coming up with strong value propositions. A very fundamental, but overlooked, part of making a strong value proposition is listening – fully engaged. If I were to add to Kim Scott's earlier advice – "Just say it! Give a damn!" – I would say: "Shut up! Pay attention!"

Sometimes people simply give up in advance and stop giving vital feedback to the newsroom, as in this painstaking example given to me by an experienced leader coming from the editorial side of the industry:

"I came in early on a video call with some of the tech people working with us on a project. I learned from their talk before the actual meeting that they had a number of very reasonable objections to the direction this project was heading. In the meeting, these objections never came up."

Every feedback is its own thing, serving different purposes, determined by the situation and needs. So you must understand: Why are you doing this? What's the purpose? What problem are you trying to solve? Do you want to understand something? Do you want a change? Do you want to energise? Are you looking for a partnership or engagement? Are you exploring an idea? Holding values high? You need to explain your interest in this. Be explicit, be specific. People don't know what

you need from them. Don't assume. Ask. Sometimes we're wrong. Stay in place. Ask follow up questions instead of jumping from subject to subject. Don't rush. For every question, ask five more. Think about how often you say something – think about it and then discover that you actually don't really mean that.[21]

This listening problem might also help us to answer why new hires – in spite of their skills, fresh ideas and new perspective – will eventually succumb to the pressure of trying to succeed in a newsroom without a real culture for feedback: if news organisations don't bother to ask, listen and learn – if journalists, editors and managers cannot take feedback – the new hires will either leave, bored and unsatisfied, or become passengers. This goes for diversity hires, for Generations X, Y and Z, the talented product managers and the best of the tech people with coding skills and/or a sharp eye for customer experience that are so hard to find these days.

Literature supports the idea of a number of business advantages coming from a strong culture of feedback.[22] With a culture of feedback, the company can create and maintain higher performing individuals and this will in turn create improved performance across the organisation.[23, 24] A feedback culture helps facilitate behaviour change which will consequently provide a space for innovation and

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[21] Insights shared by reporter, editor and interview expert Jacqui Banaszynski at Fortellingens Kraft 2021 in Bergen

[22] Baker, A., Perrault, D., Reid, A. and Blanchard, C., 2013. Feedback and organizations: Feedback is good, a feedback-friendly culture is better. Canadian Psychology, Vol. 54, No. 4, 260-268.

[23] Sharma, D and Marandure, D., 2011: Creating value through the strategic use of feedback. Social Sciences Research Network. Available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=1839992 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1839992

[24] Rummler, G. and Brache, A., 2012. Improving performance: how to manage the white space in the organizational chart. Jossey-Bass.

growth.[25,26] Pairing a creative personality with open-ended or heuristic tasks and with supportive, informational feedback leads to increased creativity.[27]

Feedback can fuel creativity, new ideas and distinctive solutions in organisations; it can stop you from making very costly mistakes when designing new products and services; and foster excellence, engagement, motivation, collaboration, diversity and inclusion. Essentially, that's why organisations, businesses and people need a strong culture of feedback. To change and grow.

[25] Baker, N., 2010: Employee feedback technologies in the human performance system. Human Ressource Development International, 13, 477-485.
[26] Mulder, R., 2013. Exploring feedback incidents, their characteristics and the informal learning activities that emanate from them. European Journal of Training and Development. 37, 4-23.
[27] Holinger, M. and Kaufman, J. 2018. The Relationship between Creativity and Feedback in Lipnevich, A. and Smith, J. (Eds), The Handbook of Instructional Feedback, chapter 26. Cambridge University Press

Limitations

Just say it! and *Give a damn!* is, of course, not the secret sauce that will end all frictions in the newsroom. Feedback is human and it is universal, but it is also sensitive to context.

The underlying assumption in Kim Scott's work – that relationships, not power, move organisations and people forward – could and should be challenged. At the very least: while relationships are key to move organisations and persons forward, so is power. After all, the power to set goals, hold values high, allocate resources and frame discussions is not evenly distributed, nor is the power to hire, promote or demote – not even in organisations that praise themselves for being non-hierarchical. Even if you do share goals, values, ressources and the right to frame discussions, none of us have common interests all of the time.[28]

Scott says it is a moral obligation to be radically candid with your boss, but recognises that this is delicate: telling hard truths to power can come with a heavy cost, also within newsrooms. A way around this problem is to ask permission to give guidance, she says: "Would it be helpful, if I told you what I thought of X?"

Other than that, the principle is the same: be helpful, stay humble, start with asking for guidance before offering it, do it immediately and preferably in person, praise in public, criticise in private and don't personalise. Though this advice may be practical and useful, it is hard to overlook the paradox: those in a position of power

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[28] For the sake of clarity: This is not just about managers and editors having more power than journalists. In the real world it can be the other way around, too: Almost anyone who has attended a newsroom meeting, where a younger boss is trying to bring change to a team of seasoned reporters, who have seen bosses come and go, will recognize the blank facial expression of a seasoned reporter thinking: 'This shall pass, too'.

should have radical candour dished out gently, while the less powerful needs to be challenged directly and rigorously.

Interestingly, Scott proposes feedback as the way out for the classic dilemma for middle managers: sometimes you have to execute decisions you don't agree with. If you tell your team that you do agree, you feel like a liar. If you tell your team that you don't, you look weak, insubordinate, or both. However, if you are able to tell your boss that you disagree with a decision, then you will have conversations that will allow you to understand the rationale behind the decision, she argues. When you understand the decision better, you have a better chance of explaining this decision to your team. When somebody on the team asks 'why are we doing this, it makes no sense, didn't you argue?', you can answer: 'I understand your perspective. Yes, I did have an opportunity to argue. Here's what I said. And here is what I learned about why we are doing what we are doing.' She suggests that this enables the middle manager to listen, challenge, but also commit and to get on board.

Once again, this advice may be both practical and useful, but it is another paradox: those in a position of power should hold back on the radical candour to subordinates, when radical candour could make the powerful look weak, insubordinate, or both.

The problem of power and hierarchy facing managers who want to give and receive direct and rigorous feedback comes in other versions, too. Gender, race and cultural biases, prejudice, bullying or harassment can not only ruin a feedback culture quickly, but on occasion, bias, prejudice, bullying or harassment can actually masquerade as feedback.

To start with biases: women tend to be interpreted as too aggressive when they challenge, while men will be praised for really knowing how to get things done. Men can have a tendency of going too easy on some people and not others.

An anonymous leader in the industry shared this story during my research: "As a journalist I started out in a newsroom with a manager who summoned female journalists to his desk when he wanted to give feedback. With male journalists, he came to their desks." I asked the leader if this feedback was ever given to the manager, so he could explain or change his behaviour: "Of course not."

How to confront bias, prejudice and bullying?

Often people are not aware of biassed behaviour. Scott suggests confronting unconscious bias by helping the person to notice the mistake with a simple correction, e.g. "I don't think you're taking me seriously when you call me honey."

Prejudice is another thing and should be confronted differently. It's hard to respond to bias, but it is harder to respond when people consciously believe in stereotypes that your gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, socioeconomic background, or any other personal attribute makes you incapable or inferior in some way.

The way to respond to active prejudice, according to Scott, is to exchange the I-statement from the first example with an It-statement, e.g. "It is disrespectful to call a grown woman a girl", "It is a violation of our company policy to hang a Confederate flag above your desk" or "It is illegal to refuse to hire women".

Bullying, and what constitutes harassment if done by a person with positional power, is done to harm you. If somebody is trying to hurt you, telling them that you are hurting might not help you, since it's only telling the bully that he or she is successful. Ignoring a bully doesn't work either, so bullying only stops when there are negative consequences for the person doing the bullying. That involves you calling the bully out.

"One way to push back is to confront the person with a 'You' statement, as in 'What's going on for you here?' or 'You need to stop talking to me that way,'" writes Scott. "A 'You' statement is a decisive action, and it can be surprisingly effective in changing the dynamic. That's because the bully is trying to put you in a submissive role, to demand that you answer the questions to shine a scrutinising spotlight on you. When you reply with a 'You' statement, you are now taking a more active role, asking them to answer the questions, shining a scrutinising spotlight on them."

Finally, feedback is culturally relative. This means you need to be aware of context. What works in one culture, probably will not translate directly to another. You may find it difficult to get a team in Tokyo to challenge authority the way you will see in the Nordic countries. It is not just cultural differences between countries and regions. There are also cultural differences between companies within the industry: a successful effort in one newsroom to redistribute talking time in meetings more equitably, may fall short in another.

This does not mean that some companies or some countries should not have the opportunity to challenge directly and care personally, it means you have to be flexible and find solutions that match the context and work for people locally.

So why is it that this simple and seemingly logical idea of enhancing feedback to empower your newsroom and come up with new and better solutions for targeted

audiences has not already been put into place? To sum it up, there are four major points of friction that limits the frequency and quality of feedback in newsrooms:

P: Power/psychology

L: Lack of feedback skills

O: Other priorities

T: Time and place

I call this the PLOT model for understanding feedback friction in newsrooms.

P: Power/psychology

Challenging directly is hard and comes with a set of uncomfortable emotions from both feedback giver and receiver. Power, interpersonal relations and cultural differences enhance this difficulty. To overcome this obstacle, first you need to establish rapport, build trust and psychological safety.

L: Lack of skills

Feedback tends to be too polite (or overly critical), too broad and general instead of very specific, and fails to offer guidance, rendering it ineffectual. When done wrong, feedback to creative people can even be harmful. Also, feedback should neither be a one-way street, or a thing that is done after the fact. It should be fast and frequent, easy, habitual and fun.

O: Other priorities

Organisations have competing ideas, agendas and priorities. In newsrooms, people are preoccupied with more important stuff than feedback. Publishing in a newsroom is about informing people about what is new, important and relevant, telling powerful stories and holding power to account.[29] All of that is increasingly done 24/7 and in fierce competition not just with other news outlets, but with a multitude of

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[29] Nielsen, R., 2020. Hvad skal vi med nyhederne? Copenhagen: Informations Forlag.

new media platforms. The media and media-tech industries are on the leading edge of innovation, but it is also a special field with its special set of fundamental economics, policy sensitivities, technology dynamics and market organisation that take a huge toll on leadership.[30] Some organisations may face even bigger issues which make an ambitious push for a feedback culture not only unlikely to succeed, but untimely.

T: Time and place

A newsroom is a busy place, the pace can be staggering. Digital editors want that story out there *now*, and reporters just want to get on with their stories. Reporters may feel that every minute spent on meetings with editors and managers is a minute they are not working on their story. They may feel like they are constantly falling behind.

Managers can easily be too far removed from the actual day-to-day reporting, trapped in meetings and projects, and, in fact, too overwhelmed to offer meaningful feedback. Middle managers face another challenge: they both need to be hands-on in operations and execute in their "day job" *and* be able to offer guidance, often on the spot.[31]

Choosing the right feedback channel is another problem. Ideally, there shouldn't be just one, but as many as possible. However, that means checking mails, texts and chat services constantly, which would effectively ruin all work and meetings in an organisation. Usually, reporters know how to get their foot in the door. But what about interns, product managers and developers, who may not be equally pushy? You may choose to go for Scrum, Slack or the like, satisfying the tech and project

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[30] Noam, E., 2018. Managing media and digital organizations. Palgrave Macmillan.
[31] Kueng, L., 2020. Hearts and Minds: Harnessing Leadership, Culture and Talent to Really Go Digital. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/hearts-and-minds-harnessing-leadership-culture-and-talent-really-go-digital> [Accessed 17 January 2022].

savvy developers for whom these tools are already a part of their daily routine. If you do, know that you've given another part of your organisation a huge advantage when it comes to shaping decisions and projects, and, ultimately, the future of your organisation. However if you don't find a tool or multiple channels, you may find it very hard to get the kind of collaboration going that will help you find new distinct ways to serve audience needs.

Now, in order to mitigate PLOT frictions, let's take a closer look at a real-world example of how feedback has served a newsroom to change and grow.

Case study: SVT News and Sports

There is no single route to implementing a great culture of feedback in a news organisation. But if you want to empower your newsroom to be truly digital, if you want to come up with exciting ideas, and if you want to help all those exciting new hires in product management succeed, some proof of concept can be found in Swedish public broadcaster, Sveriges Television (SVT) News and Sports division.[32]

In 2017, management at SVT realised they had fallen prey to the Mother Bird Syndrome: reporters and editors were waiting to be fed by managers, who found themselves increasingly micromanaging and giving detailed information instead of inspiring people to make their best work. SVT News and Sports were becoming too slow in breaking news. Younger audiences were abandoning them, too.

In interviews for this paper, project manager Christina Johannesson told me: "We [were saying]: 'Don't do this. You have to change that picture. You have to change that quote.' Instead we wanted to say: 'This is what I expect. I want this result.' Then when people come back, you can give them feedback: does this meet the expectation? Could you improve?

"We wanted people to take on the responsibility and leave behind the Mother Bird Syndrome, where you are giving detailed information and solutions to everyone. That created burnout and stress and not good enough results."

To put the challenge into perspective: In a 2018 co-worker survey of SVT News and Sports, more than half of the staff in the news division said they were unfocused, bored or passive. Leaders were also struggling with engagement, finding it hard to make real change.

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[32] Kueng 2019 and Morten Frich's interview with project manager Christina Johannesson, SVT

SVT had made all leaders re-apply for their own jobs, trying to shuffle the organisation. It didn't help much. Culture didn't change. Something had to be done. They decided to make a coordinated effort to change leadership style and skills.

First SVT did audience analysis and set up a program for making reporters, editors and managers meet the audience. Hundreds of reporters, co-workers and editors sat down at peoples kitchen tables asking what audiences need. Johannesson recalls: "You need to work on having your audience analysis straight: Where are we? Why are we doing this? Who are we trying to reach? To have an overall idea of what we're supposed to achieve."

Then SVT took a closer look at long-term strategy. "You need to have a long term idea, where you are heading on a company level," said Johannesson. "Are we supposed to concentrate on text, digital or video? Are we supposed to have a personalised site or not? Are we supposed to work with social media, or should we preserve the relationship on our own platform with our own audience? And why?

"Some have really good strategies, but nobody knows about them. Mind reading isn't working. You need to have your targets out there. We have so many people coming in and out. The words mean different things to different digital newsrooms. So you need to be clear. What do you mean by success?"

Having done that, the organisations clarified goals, roles and mandates across the newsroom, making sure data was used correctly to inform editorial decisions and innovation agile.

"We've been training a lot of leaders in understanding audience metrics," said Johannesson. "After sitting at kitchen tables asking people what they need, this has had real meaning. This is not just numbers, it's real people."

SVT was surprised to see how much lack of clarity in roles and mandates impaired the newsroom in going truly digital.

"We thought we had maybe 20 roles in the national newsroom," Johannesson said. "In reality we had 54. And it's growing. We had roles that we didn't have five years ago. The digital newsroom has grown so quickly."

Everybody knew what an editor for a current affairs program does. This knowledge was transferred from person to person, new people imitated old staff and everybody was, roughly speaking, doing the same thing. In a digital newsroom, it doesn't work like that anymore. The newsroom needs to move more quickly.

"There was so much energy wasted on not understanding who decides what in the journalistic job and in leadership," she continued. "If you have a reporter covering a story, and you need that person's material for the morning show, the current affairs show and the news site, how do we manage that in a way that is clear and operational… Things like that weren't really clear for us."

SVT was aiming for a leadership that empowers, involves and motivates the newsroom. SVT did about 300 workshops on coaching and feedback, including roleplay. In 2021 alone, SVT did 120 workshops.

"We had to involve a lot of people, facilitating leadership training and workshops to use the collective intelligence in the room: how do you provide psychological safety, creating the sense of 'we'? We have provided training to all our leaders and people, creating roleplay in active listening, coaching and feedback situations, where you are actually pinpointing something where you want someone to develop. This has been so important and astonishing. I've been a reporter myself from the beginning, I was promoted to an editor, I was promoted to a manager. I wasn't really given that many tools; how to lead. Still there are so many managers in the newsroom that

haven't really understood how to help people to develop. It has been an eye opener for many. Many have said this has been important, not only in work, but also in life."

A breakthrough came after the workshops, when SVT started working with all the leadership teams based on the training they all had. Real pacts were forged within the leadership. "You need to have the whole leadership team […] make a pact: This is how we work on feedback, this is how we lead our newsroom. That was an important thing in making the shift in engagement for leaders."

SVT decided to do the training themselves, with the help of a consultant with journalism experience, Mia Costello. "This is difficult to outsource to general leadership consultants," Johannesson explained. "You will never reach your newsroom. The tolerance for consultant fluff or mumbo jumbo is very low. You need to be very specific: what do they need? And then: this is exactly what you need."

The results, charted over the next two pages, were tangible. Engagement went up. Leaders feel they can now begin to make real change.
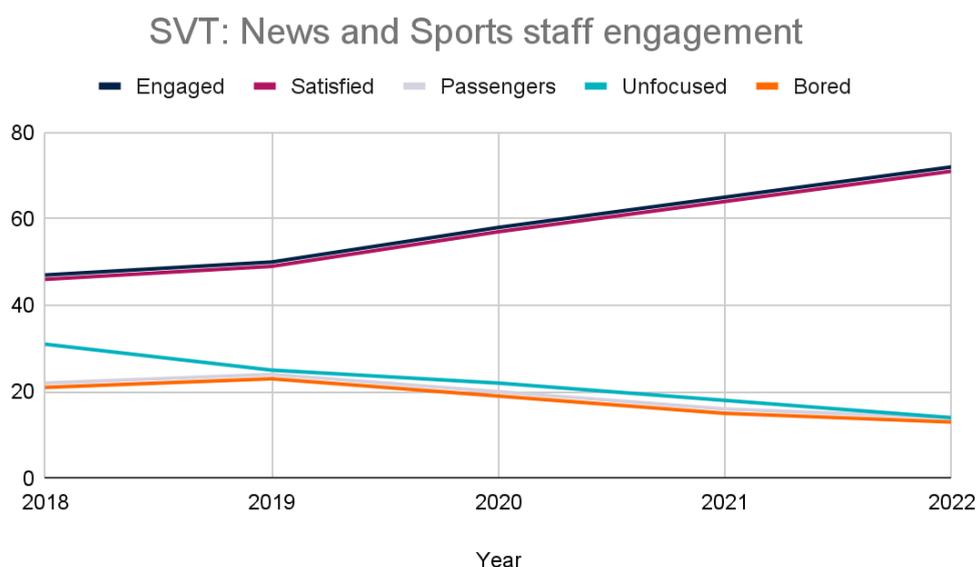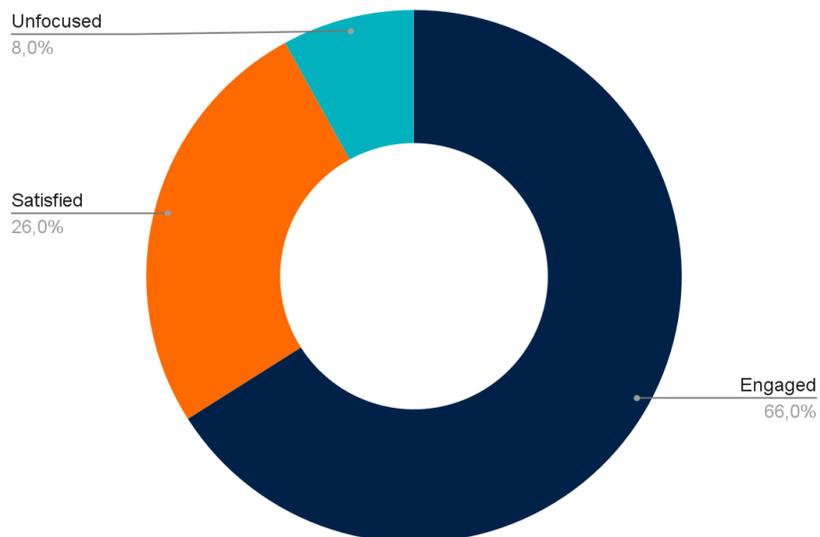

Share of News and Sports staff reporting they are satisfied and engaged vs bored and unfocused, Source: Coworker Survey 2018-2021, SVT

SVT: News and Sports leaders engagement (2020)

Bored
4,0%

Unfocused
12,9%

Engaged
40,6%

Satisfied
42,6%

SVT: News and Sports leaders engagement (2021)
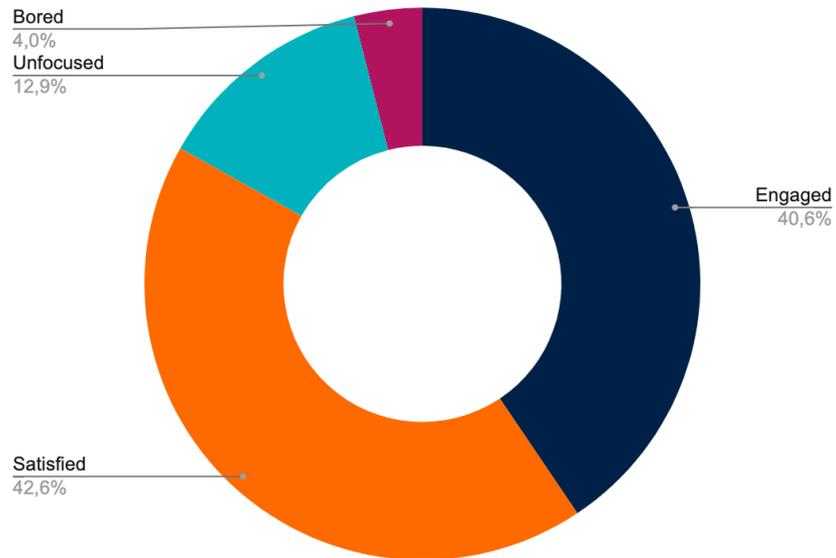
Unfocused
8,0%

Satisfied
26,0%

Engaged
66,0%

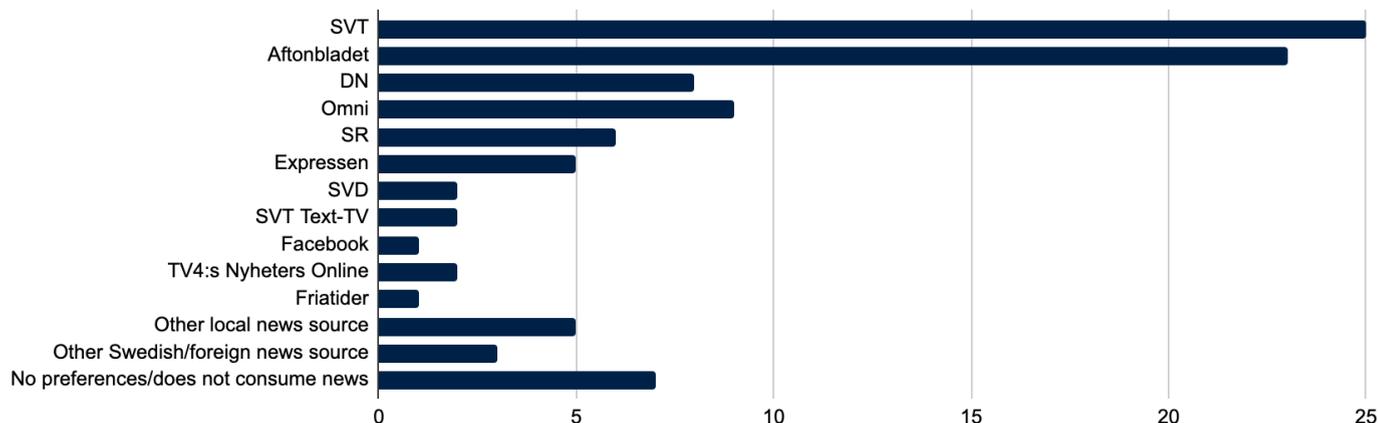*Share of News and Sports leadership reporting they are satisfied and engaged vs bored and unfocused,*

Source: Coworker Survey 2020 & 2021, SVT

One of the important targets in SVT's digital strategy was online video, and more specifically, videostarts. SVT saw videostarts skyrocketing from 2017 to 2021.

In 2016, younger people barely knew SVT's digital offer existed. The average age of the audience of the broadcast flagship's newscast was 65 plus. In 2021, SVT News and Sports was for the first time the prefered place to get news for people aged 20-39.

Prefered Digital News Source Age 20-39 years 2021

Question: Which of these news sources is your prefered choice?

News Source	Value
SVT	25
Aftonbladet	23
DN	8
Omni	9
SR	6
Expressen	5
SVD	2
SVT Text-TV	2
Facebook	1
TV4:s Nyheters Online	2
Friatider	1
Other local news source	5
Other Swedish/foreign news source	3
No preferences/does not consume news	7

Source: SVT's Attitude Survey 2021

Roadmaps for change

Based on the friction points identified earlier, and SVT's journey towards a feedback culture, we see a rough outline of a roadmap that solves the PLOT.

Step 1	Audience
Step 2	Clarifying roles, goals and mandates
Step 3	Strategy
Step 4	Training
Step 5	Leadership pacts
Step 6	Local workshops
Step 7	Monitoring
Step 8	Innovation

1. If you want audiences to engage, you must first engage with audiences. Your journey has to start with a deep understanding of new ways to solve real problems for your target audience. It may involve a lot of kitchen sink talks; it may involve surveys and focus groups. It most certainly involves data and metrics that need to be interpreted into meaningful insights and shared targets for success.

2. Clarifying roles, goals and mandates in your newsroom may seem a trivial job. But think about it for a minute: We used to know what a media product was – whether it was a newspaper or a television broadcast. Now it's much broader. The role of "journalist" used to be synonymous with "reporter" and "editor". [33] But now, a new realm of functions and responsibilities has emerged in the service of digital

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[33] Royal, C., 2018. Product management for journalists. [online] press.rebus. Available at: https://press.rebus.community/media-innovation-and-entrepreneurship/chapter/product-management/ [Accessed 30 January 2022].

platforms, products, data, and engagement. Stories themselves can be digital products with interactive or data components. Newsrooms do mobile applications, bots, special projects and event sites. We do social media engagement products that solicit user input. On top of that, you will find internal projects like content management systems, subscription services, and analytics products help organisations to more efficiently manage their operations.

Clarifying goals, roles and mandates is useful in its own right. Inevitably, it will lead to a deeper understanding of what kind of feedback culture you actually need if you want to be digital. Newsrooms are increasingly hiring product managers, whether that is the actual title in the job. If news organisations are to make the most of this role and this investment, we need to foster a culture of feedback fast.

Digital products require a different set of skills than those of a traditional reporter or editor. Product managers use design thinking and agile methods. Instead of a long, comprehensive development cycle (traditionally known as the waterfall method), products are broken down into smaller pieces or sprints, each yielding a deliverable. Feedback from the user testing phase is incorporated in each iteration of the product. Communication, collaboration, empathy and feedback from stakeholders is key.

3. Before you jump into feedback training, leadership needs to take a closer look at strategy. Without direction and without hard choices about what to do and what not, without a strong and shared vision of what success looks like, feedback will not in itself deliver real change, meaning or innovation in your organisation. A culture of feedback will motivate, empower and energise your newsroom, but you have to make sure you know where all of this energy is going. Most leaders will say 'of course', they will have spent a lot of time on strategy and feel that the strategy has been communicated over and over again. However, you may discover, a lot of journalists and editors will probably have only general and vague ideas about this strategy and

direction, some of them based mainly on mind reading and guessing. You may also find a pretty blurred understanding of how their roles and tasks specifically help the organisation move in that direction. Actionable feedback needs to be linked to strategy.

4. With a deeper understanding of your targeted audiences, with clarity on roles, goals and mandates, and having a shared sense of direction, you need to start training feedback skills in your newsroom. This is a huge task, involving workshops, co-worker and leadership training, including roleplaying. It can be done by your own HR department, it can be procured from outside the organisation. But make sure everybody is aware that this is not a project running on the side of everything else: it is at the very core of what you're trying to achieve.

5. Clearly, this change has to come from the top. Leadership needs not only to invest time and energy in this, leadership needs to drive this change and walk the talk, actively soliciting feedback. Leadership is crucial in creating (or not creating) a psychological safespace where it is not only okay, but expected and rewarded to challenge directly and care personally. After the training, leadership all through the organisation needs to forge pacts and make specific plans: how do we give and receive feedback on our teams or in our department? When do we do it? Where? How do we make it fast and frequent? How do we follow up?

6. Co-workers should participate not only in feedback training, but in local workshops, where values are shared and agreements made: what sort of a workspace do we want to have? How do we communicate? How do we listen to each other, especially when we do not understand or agree? How do we get and give feedback?

7. Monitoring is crucial to secure and document progress or re-assess. A co-worker survey like SVT's can be designed to help you monitor this closely. But there should also be local monitoring taking place to make sure you are actually making feedback

fast and frequent. First you have to make it habitual, then you should track your habit. (See the next section for tips on forming habits.)

8. Finally, this roadmap ends with innovation. You need to have a clear model for how to work collaboratively and agile across the organisation.

Habit-forming steps for feedback leaders

Step 1	Ask for feedback once a day
Step 2	Give feedback once a day
Step 3	Give impromptu feedback
Step 4	Give feedback to your boss
Step 5	Get feedback on your feedback style
Step 6	Use every meeting, 1:1, every interaction and project to get and give feedback
Step 7	Workshop: how do we want to communicate, give and receive feedback?
Step 8	Monitor feedback progress for you and your team/department

Real change is about results. You need to talk about and showcase results in the form of distinct, new solutions to targeted audiences, showing how feedback helped you get there.

With this roadmap, it seems possible to make real change by empowering your newsrooms based on a feedback culture. However, the journey will probably be a lot harder and longer than it appears on papers or you hope for. In the words of SVT's Johannesson: "To change culture and leadership styles is a very time- and energy-consuming work. It has to come at all levels at the same time. Also, whatever deadline you may set for yourselves, you may very well find it takes 20 times longer."

Conclusion

Implementing feedback should never be a tick-box exercise for its own sake. Do it with the aim of encouraging excellence, innovation, great digital solutions, and opportunities for new business. It's about excellence, innovation, great digital solutions and opportunities for new business.

So how do management harness these benefits of a culture of feedback in newsrooms? In the case of SVT, the quest for new ways to solve real problems for a target audience began with a deep understanding of their audiences. Then it took real work to clarify roles, goals and mandates in the newsroom – and a shared understanding of the direction of the whole newsroom.

Actionable feedback needs to be linked to strategy. You need to start training feedback skills in your newsroom through a number of workshops and forge real leadership pacts centred around feedback. Then you need to monitor whether that feedback is habitual, fast and frequent. And be warned: all of your efforts will probably be fruitless if this is not driven from the top.

Ultimately, what you probably want to aim for is feedback-seeking behaviour from journalists, editors and managers on all levels and across silos in the organisation. This will lead to new team-based collaborations and agile innovation.

How can feedback specifically help newsrooms come up with distinct new and better solutions relevant to targeted audiences?

A culture that encourages feedback-seeking aims to establish a bottom-up approach to enhancing organisational creativity. Whereas in the top-down approach organisations attempt to establish the climate based on policies and rules, a

bottom-up approach allows individual behaviour such as feedback-seeking to help drive organisational change.[34]

Literature supports the idea that feedback can fuel creativity, new ideas and distinctive solutions in organisations; it can stop you from making very costly mistakes when designing new products and services; it fosters excellence, engagement, motivation, collaboration, creativity, diversity and inclusion.

With the digital revolution and its rapid transformations of the market and newsrooms, feedback might just be your best bet for real change and engagement in the newsroom in the quest for new and distinctive ways to meet targeted audiences needs. Hybrid-work makes a strong culture of feedback even more pertinent, so does the war for talent in Generations X, Y and Z. Talking about diversity, inclusion and #MeToo will not suffice.

Real change in newsrooms can come from listening carefully, not only being willing to be challenged directly, but actively asking for and putting value in feedback.

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[34] Holinger, M. and Kaufman, J. 2018. The Relationship between Creativity and Feedback in Lipnevich, A. and Smith, J. (Eds), The Handbook of Instructional Feedback, chapter 26. Cambridge University Press

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