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Feedback Loops: Feedback Fundamentals

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Feedback Loops

VOLUME 1
Feedback Fundamentals

Patrick Barry

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Feedback Loops

VOLUME 1
Feedback Fundamentals

Patrick Barry

For Lisa Bernstein, whose feedback during law school (and beyond) helped me land my dream job—twice!

Another one of life's beautiful F-words is feedback, which is the ultimate growth hormone if you're willing to take it.

—Julie Lythcott-Haim, *Your Turn* (2021)

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Feedback Deserts

The acquisition of skills requires a regular environment, an adequate opportunity to practice, and rapid and unequivocal feedback about the correctness of thoughts and actions.

—Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011)

What did you get better at last year? How do you know? What should you get better at this year? How do you know?

I ask those questions on the first day of "Feedback Loops," a course I created at the University of Michigan Law school to address one of the biggest complaints that students have about school and that employees have about their jobs: these environments often feel like feedback deserts. My criterion for what counts as a feedback desert has three parts:

1. You rarely get quality feedback.
2. Nobody has explained how you should process the little feedback you do get or how to get more helpful feedback in the future.
3. You've never been taught how to provide useful feedback to other people or, importantly, to yourself.

This book—which is the first in a series—is designed to help with each of those deficits. We'll learn how to solicit feedback. We'll learn how to deliver feedback. And we'll learn how to interpret feedback.

We'll also experiment with a wide range of feedback frameworks, because not every situation calls for the same type of feedback. Personalities differ. Time constraints differ. And so do factors such as what's at stake, how many people are involved, and whether the feedback will be written, spoken, or communicated in some other way. Feedback works best when it is carefully tailored to the specific needs, goals, and interests of the recipient. Of all the times I have talked with people about the particular kind of feedback they'd like to receive, not once has the answer been "The most generic feedback possible."

We'll say more about the undesirability of generic or vague feedback in the next chapter. Being saddled with it can really hamper your career and overall development.

But right now it's time for the first of our "Feedback Labs." My students and I do these labs once a week so that we can regularly try out new approaches to feedback. Don't feel compelled, however, to be anywhere near that systematic. It's perfectly fine to focus only on the labs that seem like they'll be personally relevant. I won't be offended if you ignore the rest.

The goal of the labs is simply to expand our menu of feedback options. The initial one is even called "Feedback Ruts" to signal just how stuck we can often get in the same stultifying habits of thought and communication. Feedback, in my experience, is an area that could really benefit from a little more variety and *a lot* more imagination.

Feedback Lab #1
Feedback Ruts

Talented employees have an enormous amount to learn from one another. But the normal polite human protocols often prevent employees from providing the feedback necessary to take performance to another level.

—Reed Hastings and Erin Meyer, *No Rules Rules:*
Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention (2020)

Background

Sometimes we get stuck in feedback ruts. We offer the same generic comments from the same generic perspective using the same generic framework. That's rarely helpful to the people who have asked for our feedback. Nor is it a good way to turbocharge our own personal and professional development. Rigid, one-dimensional thinking isn't typically a great recipe for progress and growth.

Assignment

Step 1: Make a list of at least five distinct forms of feedback you've encountered over the years. Include more than simply ones you've been introduced to at school or work. Think also of the ways that movies get reviewed, restaurants get rated, and social media posts get "liked." We're trying to deepen and diversify our feedback repertoire. So be creative, even playful, with your list. Irreverence and eclecticism may yield some valuable insights.

Here are several ideas to show the range of possibilities:

- The three-star system *The Michelin Guide* uses to rank top-class restaurants.

- The five-star system you can use to rate everything from products on Amazon, to drivers on Uber, to places to stay on Airbnb.

- The "Certified Fresh" rating the website *Rotten Tomatoes* reserves for movies and television shows that receive high marks from both general audiences and professional critics.

- The actual rotten tomatoes theatergoers have thrown at poorly performing actors.[*]

- The "thumbs-up/thumbs-down" sign used by Roman emperors, modern-day YouTubers, and the film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert.

- The 1-to-10 pain scale doctors ask patients to use to evaluate their discomfort.

- The "five mics" given by the hip-hop magazine *The Source* to exceptional albums.

- The taunts, snowballs, and beer cans launched at 20-year-old Frank Olivo when he appeared dressed up as Santa Claus during the halftime show at the Philadelphia Eagles football game on December 15, 1968. (The

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[*] Here is a fun example of tomato feedback recorded by the *New York Times* back in 1883. The target was an actor named John Ritchie: "He had a crowded house, and was warmly received, in fact, it was altogether hot for him, there being distributed among the audience a bushel or two of rotten tomatoes. The first act opened with Mr. Ritchie trying to turn a somersault. He probably would have succeeded had not a great many tomatoes struck him, throwing him off his balance and demoralizing him. . . . A large tomato thrown from the gallery struck him square between the eyes, and he fell to the stage floor just as several bad eggs dropped upon his head. Then the tomatoes flew thick and fast, and Ritchie fled for the stage door." *An Actor Demoralized by Tomatoes*, New York Times, Oct. 27, 1883, at 7.

incident has forever earned Eagles fans the reputation for being some of the most brutal fans around. If even Santa Claus gets booed, you know you're facing a tough crowd.)

Step 2: For each form of feedback on your list, ask the following questions:

- What does this form of feedback *open up*? In other words, what does it allow you to communicate that other forms of feedback do not?

- What does this form of feedback *close down*? In other words, what does it prevent you from communicating that other forms of feedback do not?

You can ask these questions of pretty much any form of feedback. What does written feedback open up (and close down)? What does spoken feedback open up (and close down)? How about feedback delivered over the phone? In person? Via email? As a group?

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One-on-one? Anonymously? Informally? In a poll? Through a sur-vey? Simply by a single emoji?

For now, though, stick to merely trying to generate your list of five distinct forms of feedback. Focus on variety. Focus on breadth. Focus on trying to break out of your feedback rut.

CHAPTER 2

Keep/Cut

Vague as fog.

—Sylvia Plath, "You're" (1960)

We're now ready to address an issue we flagged in the opening chapter: vague feedback is often useless feedback, and it deprives people of key developmental guidance.

How can you improve as an athlete, a musician, a cook, a student, a parent, a boss, or even a friend if you're not given a clear sense of what you're doing wrong, what you're doing right, and what steps are needed to reach the next level of performance? Upward trajectory is rarely fueled by generalities.

"Every employee deserves direct, specific, behavioral feedback," explained Robin Ely of the Harvard Business School on the podcast *Women at Work* in 2018. "All employees need that in order to develop and advance, reach their full potential, thrive, [and] be successful in their organization."

The episode highlighted research done by Stanford's Shelley Correll and Caroline Simard that found evidence of a troubling discrepancy between the quality of feedback male employees receive and the quality of feedback that female employees receive.[*] The results of that research were published in an article called "Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back." In it, Correll and Simard document how female employees are "systematically less likely to receive specific feedback tied to outcomes, both when they receive praise and when the feedback is developmental. In other words, men are offered a clearer picture of what they are doing well and more-specific guidance of what is needed to get to the next level."

The consequences of this discrepancy can be immense, especially when it comes to promotions. "Without specific, documented business accomplishments, it is difficult for a manager to make the case for advancement," Correll and Simard note. "Conversely, if a business

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[*] The quality of feedback that transgender employees receive was outside the scope of Correll and Simard's study.

objective was missed, a lack of frank feedback deprives women of the opportunity to hit the mark next time."

Ely, the Harvard Business School professor, shares Correll and Simard's concern. "If women are not getting [helpful] feedback," she says, "then they're less likely to thrive. They're less likely to advance. They're not going to be developed."

Several steps can be taken to address this issue. Here are a few that Correll and Simard offer:

- "Before you begin evaluations, either written or verbal, outline the specific criteria you are employing to evaluate individuals. Articulate the precise results or behaviors that would demonstrate mastery. Use the same criteria for all employees at this level."

- "Systematically tie feedback—either positive or developmental—to business goals and outcomes. If you find yourself giving feedback without tying it to outcomes (e.g., 'People like working with you'), ask yourself whether you can further tie the feedback to specific results (e.g., 'You are effective at building team outcomes. You successfully resolved the divide between the engineering team and the product team on which features to prioritize in our last sprint, leading us to ship the product on time.')."

- "Strive to write reviews of similar lengths for all employees. This helps ensure a similar level of detail—and therefore of specifics—for everyone."

My law students and I have developed an additional tactic, particularly for when the goal is to provide quick, easy-to-implement feedback on somebody's presentation or piece of writing. We call it Keep/Cut.

A. Direct, Specific, Behavioral

The questions at the heart of Keep/Cut are neither especially fancy nor especially innovative:

- What should we <u>keep</u>?

- What should we <u>cut</u>?

But they do have the virtue of producing responses that satisfy the three elements that we said Ely identified as distinguishing effective feedback from not-so-effective feedback:

1. The feedback should be *direct*.
2. The feedback should be *specific*.
3. The feedback should be *behavioral*.

When my students and I suggest that someone "keep" a comma or "cut" a PowerPoint slide, for example, we're giving that person feedback that is both *direct* and *specific*. There aren't any layers of passive-aggressiveness to sort through. There's no sugarcoating to discount. It's clear what our feedback is recommending.

It's also clear—and this is the *behavioral* part—that the feedback is about actions the person can take, not aspects of their character that they need to radically transform. Whether you keep a comma or cut a slide has very little bearing on your identity or core personality. The focus isn't on who you are (or need to become). The focus is on steps you can use to improve.

Feedback that has the opposite orientation—feedback that requires a more fundamental internal metamorphosis—is likely to face considerably stiffer resistance. Try telling a chronically anxious person not to be so stressed when giving a speech. My guess is you won't get very far. You'll probably just stress them out even more.

Keep/Cut avoids that problem. If I say to you, "Keep the anecdote about your high school physics teacher" or "Cut the final example," I'm not asking you to change as a person. You can stay anxious. You can stay stressed. No major psychological overhaul is required. I'm simply offering my views in a way that is at once helpfully blunt and generously nonjudgmental. In the world of feedback, that's a rare (and welcome) combination.

B. Payoff and Prep Work

Part of the reason I like Keep/Cut so much is because I'm selfish. I personally profit from the technique pretty much every day.

The payoff is particularly big in classrooms, workshops, and meetings. In each of these environments, Keep/Cut provides a dual benefit:

1. It lowers the barrier to conversational entry for people who are more reserved. The simple menu of options—you can either pick "Keep" or you can pick "Cut"—gives even the quietest people some participatory momentum.

2. It imposes useful constraints on people who tend to ramble. There isn't a whole lot of room for digressions or grandstanding when all you are being asked to do is say "Keep" or "Cut" and support your selection with a sentence or two of explanation. A comment that begins "Keep because _____" rarely leads to unproductive pontificating.

The technique is similarly valuable in one-on-one situations, especially if the person looking for feedback has already flagged the spots they're trying to decide whether to keep or cut.

I really appreciate, for instance, when someone who wants me to review a draft of their legal brief or contract takes the time to direct

my attention toward specific paragraphs, sentences, or even words they'd like me to target. Attaching the document and just saying, "Any thoughts?" or "What do you think?" isn't that helpful.

By doing some prep work themselves—even if it's merely highlighting a few areas of particular importance—the person seeking feedback can significantly increase the efficiency of the whole exchange. I, as the deliverer of the feedback, won't waste time on unimportant sections, and they, as the recipient of the feedback, will get comments that actually address their primary concerns. Everybody wins when we avoid a feedback mismatch.

C. Internal Impact

Perhaps the biggest advantage of Keep/Cut, however, is internal. Once you get enough practice providing Keep/Cut feedback on other people's content, you begin to anticipate similar feedback when crafting your own content. Excess becomes easier to spot and eliminate. Key points stand out as valuable assets worth protecting. Edit by edit, your revision radar becomes both more powerful and more precise.

One way to understand this process is through the words of Alexander Chee, who teaches in the creative writing department at Dartmouth. Here's how he describes the awakening of his own editorial powers in *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*, which was named a "Best Book of the Year" in 2018 by a wide range of publications, including the *Washington Post*, *New York Magazine*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *Time*: "I felt I finally understood what I was doing—how I could make choices that made the work better or worse, line by line. After over a year of feeling lost, this new feeling was like when your foot finds ground in dark water."

The nice thing about Keep/Cut is that it provides a set of terms through which you can narrow and systematize the type of choices Chee eventually learned to spot, the ones that "made the work better or worse, line by line." Find a few things to keep. Find a few things to cut. Then keep doing that draft after draft. You'll gradually prune and prioritize your way to a significantly improved final product.

Feedback Lab #2
Gems and Junk

What Sjón leaves out of his work, David Mitchell wrote, is as powerful as what he puts in.
— Sam Anderson, "Into the Belly of the Whale with Sjón" (2022)

Background
The Keep/Cut framework can be applied to a wide range of projects, both personal and professional. You could do a Keep/Cut analysis of the clothes in your closet. You could do a Keep/Cut analysis of the meetings on your calendar. You could do a Keep/Cut analysis of essentially anything that lends itself to straightforward prioritizing:

- The expenses in your monthly budget

- The books on your shelves or coffee table

- The items in your purse, backpack, or briefcase

- The proposed agenda for a conference or workshop

- The guest list for your holiday party, company retreat, or (most contentious of all) wedding

Assignment
Step 1: Identify something in your personal life that could use a Keep/Cut analysis.

Step 2: Identify something in your professional life that could use a Keep/Cut analysis. (If you're a student and don't currently have a job, you can pick something in your academic life.)

Step 3: Perform a Keep/Cut analysis on whatever you identified in Step 1 and Step 2:

- Start by labeling the items that require a Keep/Cut decision.

- You can ignore anything that you know you're either clearly going to keep or clearly going to cut. Focus instead on the stuff you're unsure about. The Keep/Cut process is designed for close calls.

- Once you've finished labeling, take a break—for a day, for an hour, even for just a few minutes. Cognitive distance can help with Keep/Cut decision-making.

- When you have returned from your break, go through your Keep/Cut choices one by one.

Depending on how much time and energy you have to devote to the exercise, consider adding one more step: enlist some friends or family members to help you make your final determinations.

If, for example, people who know you very well all say "Cut" when you say "Keep," it might be good to rethink your position. Your attachment to certain things might be more emotional than it is wise. Similarly, if everyone you ask says "Keep" when you say "Cut," it's possible they've noticed something worth saving that you've overlooked. Preserving hidden gems can be just as important as ditching a bunch of junk.

E-D-I-T

*Not faux feedback that creates agreement
and closure but real feedback that
invites change and causes rework.*

—Liz Wiseman, *Impact Players* (2021)

The Keep/Cut framework is, admittedly, a bit of a blunt feedback instrument. When your only choice is to say "Keep" or "Cut," there's not a ton of room for nuance or gradation. Your comments are restricted to either endorsing what already exists or pushing for something to be removed. That's a pretty limited menu.

So in this chapter, we're going to learn about a feedback framework that creates opportunities for a greater range of opinions and recommendations: "E-D-I-T."

- Find something to <u>E</u>liminate.

- Find something to <u>D</u>ecrease.

- Find something to <u>I</u>ncrease.

- Find something to <u>T</u>ry.

A. Blue Ocean

The inspiration for "E-D-I-T" comes from a business strategy tool that uses a similar set of four letters: "E-R-R-C."

The tool was developed by Renée Mauborgne and W. Chan Kim, a pair of influential professors of management whose book *Blue Ocean Strategy: How to Create Uncontested Market Space and Make Competition Irrelevant* has sold over four million copies and been translated into close to 50 languages. The "Best Books" lists it tends to land on in business publications are not just "Best Books of the Year" but "Best Books of the Decade." In 2011, the magazine *Fast Company* even added it to the publication's "Leadership Hall of Fame."

Central to Mauborgne and Kim's recommendations are four "E-R-R-C" actions—<u>E</u>liminate, <u>R</u>educe, <u>R</u>aise, <u>C</u>reate. The first two actions focus on reining in expenses:

- Find things your competitors are doing that you can <u>eliminate</u> from your business.

- Find things your competitors are doing that you can, if not eliminate, at least <u>reduce</u>.

The second two focus on offering new features:

- Find things you can <u>raise</u> well above what your competitors are doing.

- Find things you can <u>create</u> that your competitors haven't offered yet.

Individually, none of these four actions is likely to have a big return on investment. The key, Mauborgne and Kim insist, is to regularly complete them in tandem. Organizations that solely concentrate on reining in expenses tend not to be very innovative. And organizations that solely concentrate on offering new features quickly overspend their way into oblivion. If you want to reach the profitably peaceful "blue ocean" Mauborgne and Kim allude to in their title, a combined approach is needed. Otherwise, you'll remain stuck in the crowded red ocean where the rest of the competition battles and bleeds.

B. "E-R-R-C" → "E-D-I-T"

I don't run anything like the multimillion-dollar—and in some cases multibillion-dollar—businesses that Mauborgne and Kim highlight as models of the type of "blue ocean" thinking that the E-R-R-C grid is designed to foster. Among their examples are the US airline Southwest, the Canadian entertainment company Cirque du Soleil, and a set of luxury boutique hotels operated by the Dutch hospitality chain citizenM.

Yet I do regularly use the E-R-R-C grid. I use it when giving entrepreneurs feedback on their business models and investment pitches. I use it when giving academics feedback on their research projects and grant proposals. And I definitely use it when I want to receive feedback myself, particularly on my teaching.

In fact, I frequently ask the students who work with me as research assistants to come to my classes and assess my performance based on the four actions the E-R-R-C grid identifies. They then put their analysis into what is essentially an "E-R-R-C memo."

Only we don't call it an "E-R-R-C memo." We call it an "E-D-I-T memo."

There are a few reasons for this change in nomenclature. First, the letters "E-R-R-C" don't spell out a familiar word. The letters "E-D-I-T" do. It's been an easier acronym for my research assistants to recognize and recall.

Second, the word that "E-D-I-T" spells out comes with a bonus: it thematically aligns with a course I teach called "Editing and Advocacy." Switching "E-R-R-C" to "E-D-I-T" allowed us to stay helpfully on brand.

More importantly, it highlights the key role that editing plays in many feedback situations. Coaches edit when they tell players to adjust their defensive stance. Consultants edit when they tell CEOs to restructure their org chart. Teachers edit every time they correct a student's paper, proof, or problem set.

Think, too, about instances when one of your friends or family members has commented on your outfit. "Tuck in your shirt" is a form of editing. "Put on a jacket" is a form of editing. So is "Lose the earrings," "Fix your belt," and "Don't you have anything nicer than that?" Or consider the minimalist advice often attributed to famed French fashion designer Coco Chanel: "Before you leave the house, look in the mirror and take one thing off." That's a helpful bit of self-editing and self-feedback, all rolled into one tidy admonition.

* * *

We'll continue to explore the relationship between editing and feedback in later chapters, particularly when we talk in Chapter 7 about résumé feedback and in Chapter 8 about cover letter feedback. For now, let's look at the specific changes my research assistants and I made to Mauborgne and Kim's "E-R-R-C" framework in order to turn it into "E-D-I-T." But certainly keep in mind that either set of letters can add some much-needed structure to the feedback you give and receive. The point is to develop a balanced, multipronged way to evaluate something you or somebody else has created—whether that be a paper, a podcast, an app, a meal, or even an entire company. Then try to make that thing better, step-by-systematic-step.

Eliminate

The letter that my research assistants and I kept when converting "E-R-R-C" to "E-D-I-T" is the "E" for "Eliminate." That's because a good starting point for getting feedback, especially on your writing, is to give people your document and then ask them the following question: "What should I eliminate?"

The historian Edward Countryman once praised Gordon Wood's classic study *The Creation of the American Republic* by declaring that "the book could not have been one word shorter." But that assessment
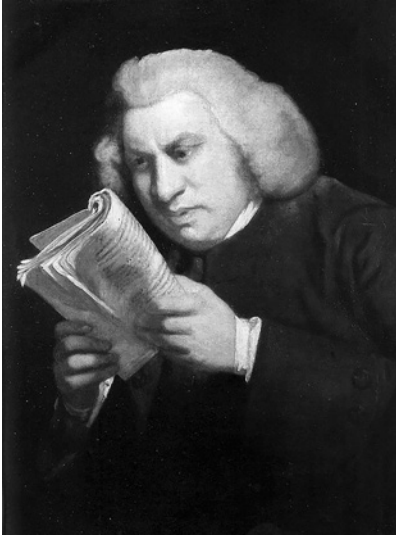
is rarely true of even the briefest tweet, let alone the needlessly protracted research papers, office memos, grant proposals, and annual reports that continually clog up our computer screens and burden our brains. More often, the experience of reading these bloated productions causes a reaction similar to what the 18th-century literary legend Samuel Johnson once said about John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, which consists of over 10,000 lines of blank verse: "None ever wished it longer."

A more recent expression of a similar sentiment comes from former Silicon Valley executive Kim Scott, whose "Radical Candor" approach to feedback has led to two bestselling books and a suite of workshops and other services. "The next time you spend two hours helping somebody edit an email until it's just two sentences," she explains, "don't feel you are wasting your time." By scrapping what doesn't need to be there, "you are getting to the essence of the idea, which allows the recipient to absorb it quickly and easily." Plus, she adds, "you are teaching an invaluable skill."

Perhaps the email Scott has in mind includes some superfluous information. Perhaps it contains an errant word, comma, or grammatical construction. Or maybe it simply uses an example that is more distracting than it is illuminating. Whatever the form of excess, chances are there is at least something in the email that can be productively removed, leaving you with some valuable editorial momentum and a lighter cognitive lift as you proceed to the next "E-D-I-T" step: "Decrease."

Decrease

The "Decrease" step in "E-D-I-T" mirrors the "Reduce" step in "E-R-R-C." Both focus on changes that aren't quite as absolute as "Eliminate." The operative mindset is definitely still "Less is more"— but it doesn't quite reach the extreme of "Zero is more." Complete erasure would be too drastic.

Suppose, for instance, that two of your coworkers are planning a professional conference and want your input on the calendar of events, especially the various panel discussions they've set up. All the speakers have been booked. All the topics have been confirmed. So the appropriate feedback in this situation is not "Eliminate." What's needed are suggestions that are more measured and flexible.

That's where "Decrease" comes in. It encourages you to look for ways to strategically shrink, trim, condense, tighten, lower, or shorten whatever you're evaluating. Applied to the conference, that might mean shaving off 15 minutes from the panel scheduled right before lunch—especially given that hungry audiences are rarely attentive audiences. It might also mean taking the 20 minutes originally allotted for Q & A and cutting that down to 10. Small savings spread across multiple domains can have a big impact.

Increase

Changing the first "R" (for "Reduce") in the E-R-R-C framework to a "D" (for "Decrease") in the E-D-I-T framework was largely done for the mnemonic payoff. We needed a word that starts with the letter "D."

A similar thought process motivated changing the second "R" (for "Raise") to "I" (for "Increase"). The letters E-D-<u>R</u>-C don't mesh quite as well as do the letters E-D-<u>I</u>-T. Linguistic aesthetics dictated the swap.

There is another difference as well, one that highlights a more fundamental way in which E-D-I-T departs from E-R-R-C. With

E-R-R-C, the reference point is always a particular industry's prevailing assumptions and business model:

- Which factors that the industry takes for granted should be <u>eliminated</u>?

- Which factors should be <u>reduced</u> well below the industry's standard?

- Which factors should be <u>raised</u> well above the industry's standard?

- Which factors should be <u>created</u> that the industry has never offered?

That's not the case with E-D-I-T. Recommendations to *eliminate*, *decrease*, *increase*, and *try* don't need to be benchmarked against some external source. No market analysis is required.

Instead, the feedback can be less outwardly comparative and more individually focused. The key yardstick isn't the competition. The key yardstick is how the person, product, project, or organization has recently been operating. E-R-R-C is designed to help you differentiate yourself from others. E-D-I-T, in contrast, has a broader reach. Although it certainly can help you differentiate yourself from others, it can also help you with a separate kind of differentiation: differentiation from *yourself*.

This shift in orientation is particularly true for the "Increase" category. What you are looking for are ways to leverage what is already working well for you—an effective studying technique, a profitable sales strategy, a promising new pilot program or policy. In other words, you're on the hunt for what Chip Heath of Stanford University and Dan Heath of Duke University call "bright spots." "When it's time for change," they write in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, "we must look for bright spots—the first signs that things

are working, the first precious As and Bs on our report card. We need to ask ourselves a question that sounds simple but is, in fact, deeply unnatural: What's working and how can we do more of it?"

An example the Heath brothers give is the solutions-based therapy approach taken by John Murphy, a high-school counselor in Covington, Kentucky. Faced with a ninth grader named Bobby who was struggling both behaviorally and academically in pretty much all his classes, Murphy didn't go through each of Bobby's bad grades one by one and try to diagnose Bobby's litany of problems. Instead, Murphy went searching for a bright spot.

"Tell me," Murphy said to Bobby during one of their sessions, "about the times at school when you don't get in trouble as much." Bobby mentioned that he rarely gets in trouble in Ms. Smith's class. So Murphy probed for more details. He wanted to know what was different about Ms. Smith's class. Were the assignments different? Was the way Ms. Smith treated Bobby different? What explained this positive outlier?

The answer turned out to be a combination of factors. So Murphy wisely shared the most important of them with Bobby's other teachers. Improvements soon followed. "Over the next three months," the Heath brothers report, "Bobby's rate of being sent to the principal's office for a major infraction decreased by 80 percent. He also made striking progress on day-to-day behavior. . . . Before solutions-focused therapy, his teachers typically rated his performance as acceptable in only one or two out of six class periods per day. After solutions-focused therapy, he was rated as acceptable in four or five of the six periods."

A key part of this story is Murphy's decision to reach out to Bobby's other teachers once he learned about the success Bobby was having in Ms. Smith's class. It's not enough to recognize a bright spot. The point is to spread it—or, in the language of the E-D-I-T framework, to "Increase" it. Think of the process sort of like upping

your investment in something that has consistently given you a really good rate of return.

Try

The final change in the conversion of E-R-R-C to E-D-I-T involves the last letter in each framework. We turned the "C" for "Create" into a "T" for "Try."

The push to develop new ideas is still there. Both "Create" and "Try" embrace experimentation and innovative thinking. But the orientation is slightly different. With E-R-R-C, the goal is to *create* previously unoffered products and services. With E-D-I-T, the goal is to *try* previously unconsidered approaches and angles. Introducing fresh perspectives—even if they don't ultimately get adopted—is the main aim.

Consider again the example of feedback on a piece of writing. If you're the one giving feedback, you might say something like the following:

- "Try switching paragraph four with paragraph three."

- "Try including a chart on page two."

- "Try a more direct opening sentence."

If you're instead the one requesting feedback, a set of guiding questions might be helpful. Here are a few:

- "Is there a different structure I should try?"

- "Is there a different example I should try?"

- "Is there a different ending I should try?"

The first three elements of the E-D-I-T framework—"Eliminate," "Decrease," and "Increase"—are great. But they can be somewhat restrictive. They stick to either getting rid of or adding to what already exists. The "Try" element, on the other hand, is much more versatile and inclusive. It allows you to introduce a wider range of feedback options. That creative expansion can be a big plus, especially given the concern we flagged at the beginning of the book about being stuck in a feedback rut.

Feedback Lab #3
À La Carte

Every new idea is a neural network of other ideas. It's recombination—a remixing of ideas put together in a new configuration. The trick is not having one big idea. It's about how to get more building blocks on the table.

—Steven Johnson, "Where Good Ideas Come From" (2010)

Background

A helpful feature of the E-D-I-T framework is that it can be used à la carte. You can separate the steps. You can mix and match. It's not an all-or-nothing operation.

Concentrating solely on "Eliminate" and "Decrease," for instance, might make sense in certain feedback situations, particularly if the pressing concern at that moment is how to find and zap wasteful excess.

At other times, however, the right choice might be to prioritize a single category. Focus on "Try" when the goal is to stretch a bit and experiment with new ideas. Focus on "Increase" when you want to build off the momentum of a key breakthrough.

Just because E-D-I-T is presented as a multistep framework doesn't mean it has to be exclusively used that way. You can unbundle the elements.

Assignment

To practice some of that unbundling, play around with different combinations of the E-D-I-T framework—or single categories of it—as you think about a few of your upcoming plans, projects, and obligations.

- If you're a teacher, is there anything that you can *eliminate* in your syllabus next semester so that you can *try* a new reading or assignment?

- If you're a parent, is there anything that you can *decrease* in your calendar this weekend so that you *increase* the time you get to spend with your kids (or your own parents)?

- And what about if you're trying to juggle multiple roles: student/athlete, sister/caregiver, spouse/entrepreneur? Which of the four E-D-I-T components might help you better balance your various commitments?

Countless other scenarios exist. The point of this Feedback Lab is simply to give you the chance to test out and customize the E-D-I-T framework. Even learning to use one or two parts of it could, over time, lead to some significant insights and improvements.

Self-Assessment, Self-Delusion

How do we manage to think of ourselves as great drivers, talented lovers, and brilliant chefs when the facts of our lives include a pathetic parade of dented cars, disappointed partners, and deflated soufflés? The answer is simple: We cook the facts.

—Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (2006)

The first few chapters of this book have included multiple opportunities for us to provide better feedback not only to other people but to ourselves. We learned how to do a Keep/Cut analysis of documents we've drafted, books we've bought, and people we're considering inviting to an event. We also learned how to apply the E-D-I-T framework, whether in its full four-part form or in its more piecemeal, unbundled iterations. We even, I hope, remember from the very beginning of the book that it's good to be aware of when we may be operating in a "feedback desert" or have fallen into a "feedback rut."

There's a rather big problem, though, with the self-evaluation side of the feedback tools we've been exploring: people are often pretty terrible at self-evaluation.

A frequently cited survey of Stanford MBA students, for example, found that 87 percent rated their own academic performance to be in the top half of the class. Similarly, a survey of university faculty found that 94 percent considered themselves to be better-than-average teachers. Those numbers don't add up. You can't have 94 percent of teachers be above average. Same with having 87 percent of students be in the top half of the class. Grade inflation is one thing. Mathematical impossibility is something else entirely.

Nor is school the only domain of our delusion. Here are several other categories where evidence suggests a wide gap between self-perception and statistical reality:

- **Driving:** In a survey of US adults, 88 percent judged themselves to have above-average driving skills.[*]

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[*] The study, which was conducted by the Swedish psychologist Ola Svenson, found that although Swedish drivers in the research pool were not quite as overconfident as US drivers were, they too produced some off-kilter results. Around 77 percent claimed to be better than average.

- **Leadership:** In a survey of high school seniors, only 2 percent judged themselves to have below-average leadership skills.

- **Grief:** In a survey of college students at two big public universities, the majority of participants judged themselves to be less capable than their peers at coping with the death of a loved one.

Fortunately, these kinds of distortions tend to diminish when we switch from assessing ourselves to assessing other people. Two psychologists—David Dunning of the University of Michigan and Erik Helzer of the Naval Postgraduate School—summarize the findings of several studies on this phenomenon at the beginning of their research study "Why and When Peer Prediction Is Superior to Self-Prediction."

They point out that although we generally overestimate how frequently we will, for instance, give blood or donate to charity, we are actually pretty good at predicting how frequently other people will give blood or donate to charity. Helzer and Dunning also mention an experiment in which naval officers predicted (quite accurately) which of their peers would get a promotion. Here's a synopsis of the experiment's findings: "When predicting who will receive early promotion to Naval officership, predictions by peers do a much better job identifying who will be promoted than do self-predictions."

A similar experiment asked surgical residents to predict who among them would pass a high-stakes exam: "[The residents'] self-ratings of surgical skill fail to predict their performance on the formal board exam they must take at the end of their surgical rotation, yet the predictions of their peers and supervisors strongly predict such performance."

The experiments that my own students tend to find most interesting, however, are the ones that suggest that your friends—or even your parents—are often better than you are at predicting

whether the romantic relationship you're currently in will actually last. Some results depend, as is often the case, on how the question is asked. But the general trend indicates that when it comes to finding "true love," it might be helpful to get a second (or third or fourth) opinion.

Feedback Lab #4
Lake Wobegon

That's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.

—Garrison Keillor, *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985)[*]
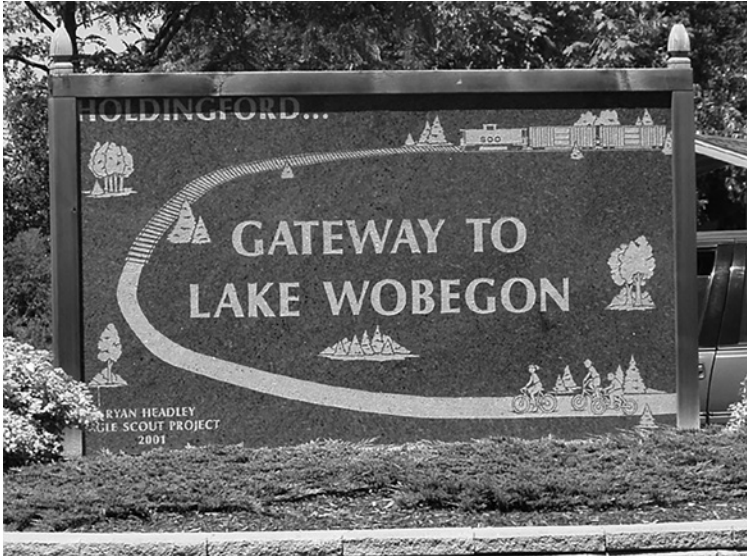
Background

In a previous section, we learned from a paper by the social psychologists David Dunning and Erik Helzer that peer assessments can be a helpful way to curb the sometimes wildly inaccurate judgments of

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[*] Keillor's description of the children in his fictional town of Lake Wobegon has led social scientists to use the phrase the "Lake Wobegon effect" to identify the tendency people have to overestimate, at least in certain instances, their abilities and positive characteristics. The term has become so common that one of the most cited research papers on the opposite tendency—underestimating your abilities and positive characteristics—playfully incorporates Lake Wobegon into its own title: Justin Kruger, *Lake Wobegon Be Gone! The "Below-Average" Effect and the Egocentric Nature of Comparative Ability Judgments*, 77 J. Personality & Soc. Psych. 221 (1999).

our self-assessments. You may think you have found the love of your life; but before you commit to "till death do us part," it might be wise to call a few friends to see if they think the two of you will even make it past Valentine's Day. The person you're convinced is your soulmate may have already, to your friends' more objective feedback eyes, presented some relationship red flags.

In a different paper, Dunning teamed up with one of his graduate students at the time, Roanoke College's Travis Carter, to explore possible explanations for what might be causing this disconnect between what we perceive and what is actually going on. Why, they wanted to know, are we often so bad at evaluating ourselves?

Their answer involves a subject that should now be familiar to us: feedback. "People live in an information environment that does not contain all the data they need for accurate self-evaluation," they explain. "People do receive feedback as they live their lives, but if one looks at the types of feedback people get—or fail to get—one often sees that the feedback people receive tends to be . . . insufficient to guide them toward accurate impressions of self."

This Feedback Lab gives you a chance to experiment with some strategies that can help address the feedback deficit that Dunning and Carter mention. Each comes from a third paper by Dunning. (As you may be realizing, he is one of the leading researchers in this field.)

Assignment

The strategies appear in "Flawed Self-Assessment," a paper Dunning published in 2004 with Chip Heath of Stanford and Jerry Suls of the University of Iowa. They involve three key areas: health, education, and the workplace.

Two of the strategies are listed below. Focus on at least one of them. Then use 50 to 75 words to sketch out how you might adapt them to your own life. You don't have to stick to health, education, and the

workplace, especially if a different domain is currently more relevant to you: your finances, your family life, your cooking skills, your social media habits, your wardrobe. A major goal of this Feedback Lab is learning to transfer successful tactics to new situations and circumstances. Knowledge extends its usefulness when it's mobile.

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1.
Category: Health

Strategy: Write What You Value

Example: In a study by a trio of Stanford psychologists, college students who wrote about a personally important value before viewing an AIDS-awareness film—such as how much they cared about their friends and family—were more realistic about their risk of getting the disease than were students in a control group who wrote about a more neutral topic.

Possible Knowledge Transfer: Would a similar writing exercise help push you, your family members, or maybe even your employees (if you have them) to be more realistic about how much money to save for retirement?

The personally important value you write about could be one you can imagine having when you eventually reach your "golden years." Is there some traveling you think you'll want to do? Are there particular hobbies or projects you hope to pursue? Do you want to be known as the grandparent who gives really good gifts? A little purposeful speculation could go a very long financial way.

The calculation changes, of course, if instead of undersaving for retirement, you're currently committing the more enviable self-assessment mistake of oversaving, an error the economists John Karl Scholz, Ananth Seshadri, and Surachai Khitatrakun explore in a 2006 paper called "Are Americans Saving 'Optimally' for Retirement?" Saving too much, they explain, "has efficiency costs in the sense that, in the absence of preferences about inter-generational transfers or charitable contributions, reallocating consumption across time could increase lifetime utility." Put differently, a penny saved may indeed be, as the saying goes, a penny earned; but at least for some hyper-frugal folks, a penny never spent could be a huge missed opportunity.

So perhaps instead of writing about a personally important value you think your 70-year-old self might have, the more appropriate exercise for oversavers would be to write about a personally important value that, by putting too great an emphasis on your *future* net worth, you're unnecessarily sacrificing your *current* well-being.

Related Research: Hal Hershfield of UCLA's Anderson School of Management has led multiple projects in which people's commitment to saving increased when they were given an opportunity to connect with older versions of themselves. When, for example, a group of research participants between the ages of 18–35 saw digitized images of what they would look like in their 70s, they allocated about 30 percent more of their current income to retirement than a similarly aged group of participants that simply saw digitized images of their present selves. Getting a glimpse of the future can be an economically motivating form of present feedback.

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2.

Category: Education

Strategy: Film Session

Example: A team of doctors and researchers at the University of Toronto were able to improve the self-assessment skills of surgical residents by taking a relatively inexpensive step: they had the residents watch a video of themselves performing a common procedure. Merely watching a video of an expert performing the procedure wasn't as useful. The real gains in self-assessment accuracy came when the film sessions showed the residents themselves in action.

Possible Knowledge Transfer: What is a skill you possess (or want to develop) that you could easily film, watch, and evaluate? The goal would be to see if the proficiency you *think* you have achieved is the proficiency you have *actually* achieved.

For a playful example, consider the "Little Kicks" episode in the classic American sitcom *Seinfeld*. In it, the character Elaine, played by Julia Louis Dreyfuss, is surprised to learn that people think she is a terrible dancer. "I dance fine," she says before being told by her friends, quite bluntly, that "You stink" and "You're beyond stink." (Earlier, a different character offered a more vivid appraisal, describing Elaine's spasmodic, thumbs-out gyrations as less like dancing and more like "a full-bodied dry heave set to music.")

What makes these judgments particularly hard for Elaine to accept is that she really enjoys dancing and isn't shy about breaking out her moves in public, including at a recent office party.

Part of the episode even revolves around her obliviousness to the fact that ever since seeing her awkward display, her entire staff has lost respect for her and many openly mock her. A lack of self-awareness can be particularly costly when you're the boss.

Admirably, though, Elaine seems open to some "face the facts" re-evaluation. And just like the research team at the University of Toronto, she turns to the brutally illuminating power of film to facilitate that process.

In true Seinfeldian fashion, the recording she makes of herself soon takes on an embarrassing life of its own, in ways that I'll let anyone who wants to check out the episode discover for themselves. Yet regardless of the recording's ultimate fate, her decision to create it—to move beyond assumptions and instead gather actual visual evidence—is commendable. "Dance like nobody's watching" remains solid advice for many occasions—your wedding, your birthday, afternoon sing-a-longs with a four-year-old.

But when it comes to improving your self-assessment skills, it could be helpful to at some point get a full, film-supported sense of whether you have the rhythm and elegance of Fred Astaire or instead move with the plodding clumsiness of Fred Flintstone. Simply dancing in front of a mirror is unlikely to suffice. You need the mental distance that comes from being able to see your movements—and mistakes—on a screen. As athletes and coaches around the world will tell you, "the tape doesn't lie."

Related Research: The McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning at Princeton University encourages instructors of all kinds to watch recordings of themselves in the classroom—twice!

When instructors watch their recordings for the first time, they tend to only focus on physical and stylistic details. Their gestures. Their outfit. Their voice, mood, and energy level. So when they watch them a second time, the center recommends that they try to expand their attention to include "specific aspects of the teaching and learning processes."

I'm about to provide a sample set of questions to help people do that. They're based on the ones the center suggests, although I've modified them slightly to give folks who aren't teachers a chance to see how this kind of analysis can be applied to meetings, conferences, and many other situations in which the goal is to clearly and compellingly communicate content to an audience:

- Did you introduce the material you'll cover and relate it to previous topics?

- Did you explain what's at stake?

- Did you give concrete examples?

- Did you ask questions to get a sense of the audience's understanding of a topic?

- Did you give specific opportunities for people to participate, whether by answering questions or working through an exercise?

- Did people respond to each other's comments or was most of what was said only directed toward you?

- Did you create opportunities for quieter people to talk or in other ways contribute?

- Did you change gears every so often (10–15 minutes) to maintain people's attention?

The really nice thing about these questions is that you can also use them to give feedback on somebody else's teaching or presentation. It's a very versatile list.

Feedback Flashback

Taking a test is not just a passive mechanism for assessing how much people know. . . . It actually helps people learn, and it works better than a number of other studying techniques.

> —Pam Belluck, "To Really Learn, Take a Test" (2011)

A book about feedback should include opportunities to get feedback. So in this section and in a section after Chapter 8, you'll be able to take a short quiz designed to give you a sense of how well you've understood the concepts we've covered so far.

Don't worry. No grades, ratings, or rankings are on the line. The primary purpose of these "Feedback Flashback" quizzes is educational—not evaluative. By pushing you to retrieve information you've previously encountered, the quizzes should increase the likelihood that you'll remember the information even after you've finished this book. As a large amount of research has shown, significant boosts in learning and long-term retention occur when you move beyond simply reading (or even highlighting) material and instead engage in some form of deliberate testing. In the words of a *New York Times* article that summarized some of this research back in 2008, testing is the "ultimate study tool."

Quiz

1. In their article "Vague Feedback Is Holding Women Back," Stanford's Shelley Correll and Caroline Simard offer several suggestions for how to address the problem of vague feedback. One of those suggestions appears below. Identify it.

   (A) "Systematically tie feedback—either positive or developmental—to business goals and outcomes. If you find yourself giving

feedback without tying it to outcomes (e.g., 'People like work-ing with you'), ask yourself whether you can further tie the feedback to specific results (e.g., 'You are effective at build-ing team outcomes. You successfully resolved the divide between the engineering team and the product team on which features to prioritize in our last sprint, leading us to ship the product on time.')."

(B) "Don't ask, 'Do you have any feedback for me?' Nobody knows how to answer that question. Instead, ask for one thing. 'What's one thing you see me doing (or failing to do) that's getting in my own way?' That they can answer—and their answer is more likely to be concrete and useful to you."

2. Which of the following best captures the idea of "bright spots" that we learned about when exploring the "Increase" part of the E-D-I-T framework?

(A) "My goal was to mobilize fellow mathematicians against the use of sloppy statistics and biased models that created their own toxic feedback loops."
   —Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2016)

(B) "Pedagogy is full of big ideas, but its unofficial golden rule is that, whenever something really works, you keep doing it."
   —Nathan Heller, "The Access Trap" (2022)

(C) "People with a fixed mindset were only interested when feed-back reflected on their ability. Their brain waves showed them paying close attention when they were told whether their answers were right or wrong. But when they were presented

with information that could help them learn, there was no sign of interest. Even when they'd gotten an answer wrong, they were not interested in learning what the right answer was. Only people with a growth mindset paid close attention to information that could stretch their knowledge. Only for them was learning a priority."

—Carol Dweck, *Mindset: The Psychology of Success* (2006)

3. Which of the following statements best sums up the results of the surveys that found that 87 percent of Stanford MBA students rated their own academic performance to be in the top half of the class and 94 percent of a university's faculty rated their teaching ability as better-than-average?

(A) "I think it's very important to have a feedback loop, where you're constantly thinking about what you've done and how you could be doing it better. I think that's the single best piece of advice: constantly think about how you could be doing things better and questioning yourself."

—Elon Musk, interview with Lance Ulanoff (2012)

(B) "A tragic example is that criticism works better than praise, and punishment better than reward. We criticize students when they perform badly. But whatever bad luck cursed the performances is unlikely to be repeated in the next attempt, so they're bound to improve, tricking us into thinking that punishment works. We praise them when they do well, but lightning doesn't strike twice, so they're unlikely to match their feat the next time, fooling us into thinking that praise is counterproductive."

—Steven Pinker, *Rationality: What It Is, What It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters* (2021)

(C) "We don't deal much in facts when we are contemplating ourselves."

—Mark Twain, "Does the Race of Man Love a Lord?" (1902)

Answers Explained

1. **The correct answer is (A): "Systematically tie feedback—either positive or negative—to business goals and outcomes."** The other answer, which advised making your feedback requests easy for people to fulfill, comes from Sheila Heen, who serves as the deputy director of the Harvard Negotiation Project and is the coauthor of *Thanks for the Feedback*. She offered it in an interview with the *Washington Post* soon after the book was published.

   For a review of Correll and Simard's advice, take another look at Chapter 2.

2. **The correct answer is (B): "Pedagogy is full of big ideas, but its unofficial golden rule is that, whenever something really works, you keep doing it."** Feedback often focuses on what is going wrong or not working. The idea of "bright spots"—and the "Increase" part of the E-D-I-T framework more generally—reminds us that it can also be helpful to look for things that are going well and try to amplify them.

   For a review of "bright spots" and the E-D-I-T framework, take another look at Chapter 3.

3. **The correct answer is (C): "We don't deal much in facts when we are contemplating ourselves."** You can't have 87 percent of students or 94 percent of teachers be above average. Instead, the results of these surveys highlight the distortions and inaccuracies that can creep into self-evaluations.

   For a review of the perils of self-evaluations, take another look at Chapter 4.

Challenge-Recovery

Challenge, recovery, challenge, recovery—that is what toughens us.

—John Coates, *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf* (2012)

The last question in the previous chapter's Feedback Lab focused on a type of microlevel gear-switching that can be useful when helping someone (including yourself) improve the way they deliver presentations or teach: "Did you change gears every so often (10 to 15 mins.) to maintain people's attention?"

We'll now switch our focus to a more macrolevel form of gear-shifting: figuring out how to balance "challenge" days and "recovery" days during a long-term project.

Think, for example, about your last few weeks. How many felt like challenge days? These are days during which you have to perform at a high level, whether because a major task requires a lot of your energy and mental bandwidth—studying for a big test, preparing for a tough negotiation, dealing with an unexpected family crisis—or because the time available to handle a lot of minor tasks seems cruelly inadequate. If "lunch" yesterday consisted of a KitKat, two phone calls, and some frantically typed emails, you likely had a challenge day.

Recovery days, on the other hand, are (intentionally) much less hectic. Efficiency and execution are not the goals. Rejuvenation is.

A good description of the experience appears in *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf* by John Coates, a former derivatives trader at Goldman Sachs who left Wall Street to study neuroscience at the University of Cambridge. "No matter how brief, our bodies take advantage of the downtime to rest and repair," Coates explains, "and over time these mini-breaks can add up to a healthy body and brain. Should we be denied these downtimes, even very brief ones, even when things are going well, our biology can become unbalanced, leading us into pathological mental and physical states and inappropriate behavior."

Or consider the self-regulating habits of Varshini Prakash, the cofounder

and executive director of Sunrise Movement, a climate justice organization whose political influence has grown considerably since it launched in 2017. Here's how the journalist Andrew Marantz captured the recovery part of Prakash's routine in an in-depth look at the organization he published in the *New Yorker*: "Once each day, she sat outside and meditated using the Calm app on her phone. Even when negotiations in Washington demanded her attention, she tried not to cancel therapy appointments or break phone dates with friends. 'My job is to wake up every day and stare into the abyss of human suffering,' she said. 'If I didn't stick to certain habits that keep me grounded, I would one hundred percent lose my f***ing mind.'"

A. Calendar Coding

With Coates and Prakash's comments to help guide you, take out a calendar. Did yesterday feel like a challenge day? If it did, mark it with a big red "C." If it instead felt more like a recovery day, mark it with a big blue "R." Then repeat this exercise with the day before yesterday. And the day before that. And the day before that. Keep going until you've labeled each of at least the previous 10 days with either a "C" or "R."

You're certainly welcome to go beyond 10 days. Label the previous 20 days. Label the previous 30 days. Label your entire academic semester or financial quarter. The bigger your sample size, the better. We want a colorfully concrete representation of whether your challenge-recovery ratio needs to be adjusted.

Be aware, though, that if you recently became a parent, switched jobs, assumed caregiving responsibilities for an aging relative, or started pursuing a new degree, your impulse may be to mark *all* your previous days as challenge days. Many of my law students, for example, are only half-joking when they tell me that they don't even know what the word *recovery* means anymore. The relentlessness of three years of law school—the studying, the job-hunting, the extracurricular

events and responsibilities—can often make the experience feel like trying to run a marathon at a sprinter's pace.

But do your best to try to find at least a few days (or even just a few afternoons) that you could reasonably label "recovery." Maybe you had a nice, long lunch with a friend. Maybe you went on a relaxing walk by yourself. Or maybe you simply found time to take a proper nap. Not a guilty nap. Not an accidental or surprise nap, where your eyes close involuntarily during a really boring presentation.

No, the kind of nap I am talking about is planned, pillowed, and purposeful. "Twenty minutes or so of light, untroubled sleep, just when you need it," as the writer James Parker suggests in "Ode to Naps," his playful celebration of deliberate dozing. The goal, he explains, is refreshment and revival, a process that gives you a chance to dip into a "delicious shallowness" and then emerge both mentally and physically reset: "You open your eyes. You're awake again, in a state of lamblike innocence, blinking limpidly and contentedly: a prick of health is on your skin. Ah, it feels so good. What a great idea that was, to take a nap."

B. Feedback Friction

There are three reasons why we are thinking about challenge and recovery at this point in the book.

- First, self-feedback is an important form of feedback. Research in a wide range of domains—sports, school, music, medicine, business, law—has consistently demonstrated the benefits of taking time to assess your own performance. In a study done by Francesca Gino of Harvard Business School and several other management professors, for example, employees who were given the opportunity to spend 15 minutes at the end of the day reflecting about lessons learned performed 23 percent better after 10 days

of work than employees who were not given any time to reflect. "Now more than ever we seem to be living lives where we're busy and overworked," Gino said in an interview about the study, "and our research shows that if we'd take some time out for reflection, we might be better off."

- Second, the language of challenge and recovery can give you a way to frame many other types of feedback:

  ◦ **Friend to Friend:** "The itinerary you put together for our trip looks really great—but I'm worried it might be a bit too ambitious. Is there any chance we can swap out the third hike for a recovery day, or at least a recovery morning? I don't want us to be so exhausted that we don't enjoy the rest of the week."

  ◦ **Boss to Speechwriter:** "Well done! I think the draft you put together has a good mix of challenge and recovery moments. We want to confront this group with some facts they may not be fully prepared to face, so it's good you included those jokes toward the end of the second section. That will helpfully lighten things up before we make our big request."

  ◦ **Employee to Supervisor:** "I think I'm ready to take on another challenge assignment. It was nice to ease back into things after the holidays with a couple of smaller projects. But I'd now love to handle—or even lead—something more substantial."

- Third, if you don't get your own challenge-recovery balance right, the quality of the feedback you give other people can suffer, as can your ability to productively process the feedback that's sent your way. If you've just had three straight challenge-heavy months,

weeks, days, or even individual meetings, you might not have the mental and emotional reserves to sit down with a poorly per-forming team member to share what people find so hard about working with them. Nor, when you head home from the office that night, are you likely to be in the mood to hear from your spouse or roommate that you need to start contributing more around the house. Their comments may be perfectly justified; in your recent recovery-less existence, you've probably neglected all sorts of other responsibilities—loading the dishwasher, schedul-ing a doctor's appointment, unpacking the suitcase from the trip you took over two weeks ago. But given your current mindset, all you're going to hear is unwarranted nagging. That's going to create some feedback friction.

Feedback Lab #5
Red Days and Blue Days

Kenea thinks that moving around has helped her navigate the emotional toll of the pandemic without losing hope—she has witnessed death firsthand, but in episodes, each hospital providing a change of scenery. And when she "decommissions" from an assignment, she allows herself a break before she takes a new job. She feels overwhelmed at times but never burned out. At the end of each shift, she assesses her day, and if she feels she has done everything she can, she lets go of it as soon as she leaves the parking lot.

—Lauren Hilgers, "Nurses Have Finally
Learned What They're Worth" (2022)

Background

Once you have looked at the past few weeks to figure out which days were your challenge days and which were recovery days, turn your attention to the *next* few weeks. What mix of challenge and recovery do you think you should aim for now? Think about when you're likely to have to push yourself to perform at a high level, as well as about when you'll need to build in time to slow down, unwind, and repair.

In addition to considering the total number of challenge days and the total number of recovery days, be mindful of the sequence of those days. Twenty-eight straight challenge days followed by two recovery days is not a good plan—unless, of course, your main goal next month is to be exhausted, error-prone, crabby, and generally resentful of anyone who looks relaxed and well-rested.

At the same time, however, as nice as twenty-eight recovery days followed by two challenge days may sound right now, I doubt that is the optimal schedule (at least in the long-term) for a lot of people. It's certainly not the optimal schedule for the students I tend to teach

and advise. Nobody's reason for going to law school, business school, or medical school is "Because I want to coast."

Assignment

Create a "Challenge-Recovery Calendar." If you want to come up with a more sophisticated color-coding system than simply a red "C" for "Challenge" and a blue "R" for "Recovery," feel free to experiment with other options. You can try using purple to designate hybrid activities that feel like a form of *challenging recovery*—going on an ambitious hike, hosting an elaborate dinner party, taking on the famously difficult Sunday version of the *New York Times* crossword. You might also consider intensifying the color of the red on a challenge day that you expect to be particularly stressful:

- The day you have to deliver a high-stakes presentation to your boss

- The day you have to take a final exam in your hardest class

- The day you have to initiate a difficult conversation with someone who doesn't bring out the best in you

The point is to design a system that will allow you to better plan for and navigate the inevitable ebbs and flows of energy, opportunities, requests, disappointments, and surprises of a full life.

To help with that, here are some additional approaches to the challenge-recovery balancing act. Borrow any that seem promising. Ignore the ones that don't. There's a wide range of domains to choose from.

Swimming

"As the competition approaches, we gradually reduce our training load so that our bodies will be able to draw from the training base while still being rested enough so we aren't too tired and sore. That's the taper."

—Michael Phelps, *Beneath the Surface: My Story* (2016)

Baseball

"Show up late but be ready. That's the message Cubs manager Joe Maddon conveys during the annual 'American Legion Week,' which starts Tuesday and encourages players to report to Wrigley Field whenever they feel like before a game.

'I want it to be reminiscent of when we played as kids,' said Maddon, who started the late August tradition with his Rays teams more than 10 years ago. 'And you didn't show up so early and take 100

swings in the cage and another 50 on the field or pore over information and data. And you know what? We played well. Sometimes I think the stuff is overdone. I really believe in a fresh mind and body this time of the year.'"

—Mark Gonzales, "Joe Maddon Hopes 'American Legion' Week Sharpens Cubs Players' Focus for Stretch Drive" (2019)

Pilots

(a) "No program manager may assign any flight crewmember, and no flight crewmember may accept an assignment, for flight time as a member of a one- or two-pilot crew if that crewmember's total flight time in all commercial flying will exceed:

    (1) 500 hours in any calendar quarter;

    (2) 800 hours in any two consecutive calendar quarters;

    (3) 1,400 hours in any calendar year.

(b) Except as provided in paragraph (c) of this section, during any 24 consecutive hours the total flight time of the assigned flight, when added to any commercial flying by that flight crewmember, may not exceed:

    (1) 8 hours for a flight crew consisting of one pilot; or

(2) 10 hours for a flight crew consisting of two pilots qualified under this subpart for the operation being conducted."

—Department of Transportation, "Flight Time Limitation and Rest Requirements: One or Two Pilot Crews" (2022)

Lions

"After gorging themselves, lions may rest for up to a week before hunting again."

—Donald Moore, "Carnivore Mammals: Feline, Canine, and Ursine" (2017)

Coral Reefs

"In February 1929 [oyster researcher Maurice Young] was astonished to find that the seawater in the pools left by the receding tide was 'literally hot to the touch,' and on a subsequent low tide he noticed that large patches of the stony, branching coral that dominated the healthy reef had turned white—the first recorded instance of coral bleaching as a result of elevated

sea temperature. But by the time of the next extreme low tide, in April, the corals had returned to their usual color. We now know that such bleaching and recovery is a normal response to stress by corals. Bleaching becomes deadly only when high temperatures persist."

—Tim Flannery, "In Hot Water" (2022)

Noise Pollution

Distinguishing the signal from the noise requires both scientific knowledge and self-knowledge: the serenity to accept the things we cannot predict, the courage to predict the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

—Nate Silver, *The Signal and the Noise* (2012)

The authors of *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment* are a trio of intellectual heavy hitters: Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman, constitutional law scholar Cass Sunstein, and former McKinsey consultant (and current management professor) Olivier Sibony. As prolific as they are prominent, the three of them have collectively produced over 50 books and hundreds of articles, including some of the most cited research in social science. If academic publishing ever becomes an Olympic sport, they'll be prime medal contenders, particularly if they get to compete as a team or on a relay. Their combined coverage of law, economics, psychology, medicine, education, finance, political science, corporate strategy, statistics, and even Star Wars gives the book the feel of a cognitive decathlon.

At the center of it all is a distinction that has major consequences for all kinds of feedback: the difference between *bias* and *noise*.

A. Bias, Noise, and Dart Boards

Judgments are biased, the authors explain, when they are "systematically off target." If, however, "people who are expected to agree end up at very different points around the target," then we have a separate problem: the problem of noise.

To help illustrate this contrast, the authors begin the book with an example that involves a bull's-eye at a shooting range. When I summarize the main points of the example for my law students, however, I switch the visual to a bull's-eye on a dart board and ask them to imagine that a group of people throw a bunch of darts at it. Each person aims directly for the bull's-eye. Each person tries their best. Yet when we take a look at where their darts end up, we notice that every single one lands slightly to the right of the bull's-eye.

Not to the left. Not above. Not below. All cluster in the same spot to the right.

That's what bias is, according to Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein. The darts are "systematically off target."

Think of the many studies that have uncovered racial bias or gender bias (or both) in the way hiring decisions are made, criminal sentences are delivered, and mortgage rates are offered. There is a depressingly recognizable pattern to these forms of discrimination. We can predict how the next decision in the queue is going to go.

Or, to take a less grave example, consider a research paper by the economist Noland Kopkin called "The Nature of Regional Bias in Heisman Voting." Using a data set that stretched over 25 years, Kopkin found that the hundreds of journalists and other pundits who vote every year for college football's most prestigious award, the Heisman Trophy, have exhibited a consistent bias toward players from their own region. Voters from the Northeast favor players from the Northeast. Voters from the Southwest favor players from the Southwest. And so on.

The bias isn't egregious, and Kop-kin suggests that the overall effect is decreasing now that there are more and more ways to watch games from every region. But if we imagine each of those votes as darts on the dart board we've been talking about, we'd probably see quite a bit of clustering. There'd be a cluster around the Northeast of the dart board, representing the bias of vot-ers from that region. There'd be a cluster around the Southwest of the dart board, representing the bias of the voters from that region. There'd be clusters all over the place. That's what the problem of bias looks like.

If, however, the problem were *noise*, there wouldn't be any clusters. There wouldn't be predictable pat-terns. There would simply be a random assortment of darts.

B. Noisy Judgments, Major Damage

Bias and noise are both big problems, particularly when it comes to giving and receiving feedback. But Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein

worry that concerns about bias, however legitimate, have overshadowed concerns about noise. "The topic of bias has been discussed in thousands of scientific articles and dozens of popular books," they write, "few of which even mention the issue of noise." Bias has become "the star of the show," while noise is treated as "a bit player, usually offstage." Their book tries to correct that imbalance, a task they believe is particularly important given the stakes involved. Here are a few of the many areas they identify where noisy judgments can cause major damage:

- **Doctor Diagnoses:** "Faced with the same patient, different doctors make different judgments about whether patients have skin cancer, breast cancer, heart disease, tuberculosis, pneumonia, depression, and a host of other conditions."

- **Child Custody Decisions:** "Case managers in child protection agencies must assess whether children are at risk of abuse and, if so, whether to place them in foster care. The system is noisy, given that some managers are much more likely than others to send a child to foster care."

- **Patent Applications:** "The authors of a leading study on patent applications emphasize the noise involved: 'Whether the patent office grants or rejects a patent is significantly related to the happenstance of which examiner is assigned the application.'"

C. Personality Change

One source of these distortions is what the authors call "occasion noise": when faced with the same decision at different times, people make conflicting judgments. Asked to review an identical set of X-rays several months apart, for example, a set of doctors disagreed with their original judgment between 63 percent and 92 percent of the time. That's not doctors coming to a different conclusion than

other doctors. That's doctors coming to a different conclusion than themselves.

Or consider a frequent criticism of personality tests like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. If you take the test more than once, there's a good chance the feedback you get from it will be inconsistent, even contradictory.

That happened to Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania and author of bestselling books such as *Give and Take* and *Think Again*. In an article titled "Goodbye to the Myers-Briggs Typical Indicator, the Fad That Won't Die," Grant shares the incompatible scores he received. The first time he took the test he was classified as an "INTJ," meaning he was allegedly more introverted than extroverted, more intuiting than sensing, more thinking than feeling, and more judging than perceiving. These labels initially seemed to match Grant's own image of himself: "Although I spend much of my time teaching and speaking on stage, I am more of an introvert—I've always preferred a good book to a wild party."

Yet when Grant took the same test a few months later, each of those classifications reversed. Now, apparently, he was a big-time extrovert: "Suddenly, I had become the life of the party, the guy who follows his heart and throws caution to the wind."

Grant's experience is a textbook example of occasion noise and also one of the reasons he says that "when it comes to accuracy, if you put a horoscope on one end and a heart monitor on the other, the Myers-Briggs Test falls about halfway in between." In other words, as a form of feedback, the test has a lot of noise and not much use.

D. Under Performance

The authors of *Noise* don't mention Grant's essay. But he is one of many academic luminaries who provides a cover blurb for the book. "Get ready," he raves, "for some of the world's greatest minds to help you rethink how you evaluate people, make decisions, and solve

problems." Grant has also done an extensive research project as a consultant for Facebook to help fix something the *Noise* authors devote an entire chapter to: employee performance reviews.

One complaint about performance reviews—especially those that happen only once a year—is the time lag involved. The reviews come long after the person being reviewed could have used the instruction and guidance the process is designed to provide. Here's how a manager at PricewaterhouseCoopers, which is one of the many major companies that have moved away from annual performance reviews, expressed that frustration: "You don't give elite athletes coaching at the end of the season. You give it in the middle of the game."

The authors of *Noise*, however, focus on a different problem. Discrepancies in evaluations often have more to do with the person doing the evaluating than with the person being evaluated. Imagine that you ran a race and three different stopwatches evaluated how well you did compared to the other runners. One stopwatch said you finished second overall. Another said you finished 11th. And the third didn't even put you in the top 50.

Wouldn't that be kind of frustrating? Wouldn't you think something was wrong with the way your performance in the race was assessed?

Any student who has picked a class based on whether the teacher is a hard or easy grader has faced a similar issue. For over a century, research has shown that teachers vary widely in how they evaluate students. In one of the most cited experiments, the same two English papers were given to 200 teachers. The authors of the study—Daniel Starch and Edward Elliott of the University of Wisconsin—were

quite disturbed by the huge discrepancy in the grades the papers received. One paper, for instance, earned a near-perfect score from some teachers, but it received a failing score from others. "It is almost shocking to a mind of more than ordinary exactness," Starch and Elliot said of the overall results, "to find that the range of marks given by different teachers to the same paper may be as large as 35 or 40 points."

When Starch and Elliot tried the same experiment with math teachers—a group presumably more committed to objective, stable standards—the variation persisted. Even though the teachers were evaluating identical student responses to questions about theorems, bisecting angles, and the hypotenuse of a triangle, they gave those responses widely different grades.

That's not bias. (There was no identifying information about the students' race, gender, or other characteristics the teachers could have been improperly influenced by.) That, alarmingly, is noise.

Feedback Lab #6
Decision Hygiene

Different creative writing tutors will respond to the work presented to them in unpredictable ways. One will like what another dislikes; contradictory advice can be given in two different classes about the same piece of work. So the question is, how can academic appraisal proceed on such terms?

—Rachel Cusk, *Coventry* (2019)

Background

By the end of Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein's book, it's hard not to think that anyone who gives or receives feedback is operating in an exceedingly noisy world. There is noise in evaluative, backward-looking feedback—particularly when jobs and promotions are on the line. There is noise in developmental, future-looking feedback. There is even noise in feedback *about* feedback. It's enough to make you want to invest in a really good pair of earplugs.

A better approach, however, would be to follow the steps the authors suggest lead to good "decision hygiene." Here are a few that one of those authors, Olivier Sibony, highlighted in an interview soon after the book was published.

- **Aggregate multiple independent judgments:** "Whenever you have different people making judgments, rather than assign the judgment to one person or gathering three people to talk about it around the table, get them to make their judgments independently and take the average of that."

- **Invest in competence:** "Some people are going to be better than others at any judgment. In medicine, for instance, some diagnosticians are better than others. If you can pick the better people, that helps. The better people are going to be more

accurate; they are going to be less biased but they're also going to be less noisy. There is going to be less random error in their judgments."

- **Use relative rather than absolute scales:** "If you replace an absolute scale with a relative scale, you can eliminate a very big chunk of the noise. Think of performance evaluations again. Saying that someone is a 'two' or a 'four' on a performance-rating grid—even when you have the definition of what those ratings mean—remains fairly subjective, because what 'an outstanding performer' or 'a great relationship skill' means to you is not necessarily the same thing that it means to me. But if you ask, 'Are Julia's relationship skills better than those of Claudia?' that's a question I can answer if I know both Julia and Claudia. And my answers are probably going to be very similar to yours. Relative judgments tend to be less noisy than absolute ones."

None of these three ideas is particularly groundbreaking. Implementing them won't necessarily win you any awards for innovative teaching, leadership, or management. Nor will conducting the "Noise Audit" the authors attach as an appendix to the book. As Sibony acknowledges, noise prevention is "a little bit thankless."

But what you miss out in terms of gratitude and acclaim, you might gain in terms of efficiency, accuracy, and fairness. You don't need to be anywhere near as credentialed and accomplished as the book's three authors to know how beneficial that tradeoff can be.

Assignment

Pick at least one of Sibony's suggestions to experiment with:

- Aggregate multiple independent judgments

- Invest in competence

- Use relative rather than absolute scales

Try the strategy with your coworkers or classmates. Try it with your customers or clients. Try it with pretty much anyone you often trade opinions and judgments with. Few feedback situations won't benefit from at least a little less noise.

Breadth and Depth

For any given role, some skill requirements are universal. Every team member may need to be comfortable working with data, or solving problems in a structured way, for example. Beyond those basics, however, they will also want to develop a deeper understanding of topics that allow them to make a real difference in their job. That could be the application of machine learning to optimize a specific industrial process, or how to design sustainability into products and services. The result is a T-Shaped skills profile, with a broad set of generally applicable skills, supplemented by a spike of specific expertise.

—Markus Hammer, Maya Harris, Kiran Ramnae, and Erin Blackwell, "Ops 4.0—The Human Factor: A Class Size of 1" (2021)

Nobody is born knowing how to craft an effective résumé. In fact, there's a line in the novel *Love* by Toni Morrison in which she describes someone who, embarrassingly, pronounces the word *résumé* with two syllables instead of three—not "ré-su-mé" but "re-sume," as if the term rhymed with *perfume*.

Don't feel bad if you've made a similar mistake. *Résumé* isn't the most intuitive of words, particularly when the accent marks aren't included as phonetic guidance. But because the document itself can play a major role in the trajectory of your career (and the careers of people you care about), let's use this chapter to think about how you might improve the résumé feedback you offer—especially to yourself.

A. T-Shaped

One place to start is with a concept that appears to have originated at the consulting firm McKinsey in the 1980s and then jumped in popularity after being endorsed in 2010 by Tim Brown, the CEO of the innovative design firm IDEO. It's the idea that the most valuable employees are "T-Shaped": they combine a breadth of knowledge across a wide range of domains (the horizontal part of the "T") with a depth of expertise in a specific area (the vertical part of the "T").
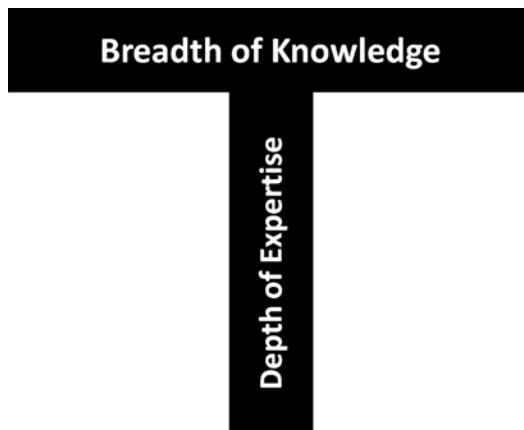
Here's how Brown explains the balance, beginning with the vertical part: "The vertical stroke of the 'T' is a depth of skill that allows [people] to contribute to the creative process. That can be from any number of different fields: an industrial designer, an architect, a social scientist, a business specialist, or a mechanical engineer." Now comes the horizontal part: "The horizontal stroke of the 'T' is the disposition for collaboration across disciplines. It is composed of two things. First, empathy. [Empathy] is important because it allows people to imagine the problem from another perspective, to stand in somebody else's shoes. Second, they tend to get very enthusiastic about other people's disciplines, to the point that they may actually start to practice them."

Not every employer, of course, will be looking for T-Shaped candidates. Sometimes the focus will be on depth, especially in highly specialized industries and positions—the elite group of structural engineers who help build super tall skyscrapers, the small set of Nepalese Sherpas who lead climbers up Mt. Everest, a home health care worker who can communicate in Nicaraguan sign language. Other times it will be on breadth, or even just a willingness to fulfill multiple different roles.

Yet this notion of being T-Shaped can be a good way to begin to evaluate what's missing or what needs highlighting in any résumé you review, including your own.

- Does the résumé sufficiently demonstrate *breadth*? Does it include a valuable range of skills, interests, and experiences?

- Does the résumé sufficiently demonstrate *depth*? Are there words, phrases, and bullet points that signal mastery in something useful or at least interesting—a second language, an intellectual discipline, a professional certification?

B. Revision and Development

I offer the questions about breadth and depth to help with two forms of feedback:

1. **Feedback That Focuses on Revision:** If it looks like the creator of the résumé you are reviewing does have both breadth and depth—but they haven't skillfully highlighted those qualities on their résumé—spend your feedback session editing the document accordingly.

2. **Feedback That Focuses on Development:** If it looks like the creator of the résumé you are reviewing lacks breadth, depth, or possibly both of those qualities, spend your feedback session brainstorming ways they can try to acquire some relevant skills and experiences in the coming weeks, months, and years. Résumé feedback doesn't always have to be corrective. Crossing out certain lines and replacing them with others isn't the only way to be useful. You can also help people by identifying gaps that need to be filled and suggesting future opportunities to pursue.

With these two goals in mind, approach résumé feedback with an eye toward both framing information that is already there and creating information that will at some point be good to include. Think of it as a way of strategically looking both backward (at what the person has done) and forward (at what they might want to do) all at the same time.

Feedback Lab #7
6-60-6

The most effective résumés focus on what hiring managers need to know, and leave off the details they don't. The less space taken up by nonessential information, the easier it is for the person reading the résumé to focus on the salient details.

—Lynda Spiegel, "What People Should Leave Off
Their Résumés (but Rarely Do)" (2021)

Background

We've learned that one way to approach résumé feedback is to try to help the applicant (or yourself) create a document that *quickly* communicates a valuable range of skills, interests, and experiences. I stress "quickly" because in many cases people are not going to look at your résumé for very long. One study by the job-search company The Ladders, for example, used eye-tracking software and found that recruiters spent an average of just 7.4 seconds before moving on to the next résumé in the stack. "To put that in perspective," writes Kristi DePaul for the *Harvard Business Review*, "close your eyes and take two deep breaths." That's it. That's all the time a résumé often gets.

In certain organizations, however, key decision-makers will study a résumé very closely. Even minor typos—especially for detail-oriented professions like law, accounting, or engineering—can be quite costly. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, over 75 percent of employers reject applicants if their résumés contain spelling errors or are grammatically sloppy.

So this Feedback Lab provides a framework that can be used both when a résumé will be given only a brief glance and when it will be treated with more careful scrutiny. The framework, which I often use with my own students, is called "6-60-6."

Assignment

Step 1: Read the résumé you have decided to review. Keep the following "6-60-6" framework in mind:

- 6 seconds: What's your six-second impression of the résumé? What are the two or three pieces of information that stand out the most?

- 60 seconds: Can you quickly see that the applicant has all (or at least many) of the necessary skills to perform the job they're pursuing? Here, for example, is a list of skills that I tell my law students they might want to specifically include:
  - Writing ability
  - Speaking ability
  - Analytic ability
  - Creativity
  - Initiative
  - Leadership
  - Teamwork
  - Compassion

- 6 hours: If you had six hours with this résumé, would you be able to spot an error? (You can usually answer this question in six minutes. The point of saying "6 hours" is that the résumé has to survive all levels of review, from a quick scan to a thorough inspection.)

Step 2: Take a break. Feedback often improves after you give your brain a chance to settle and reconfigure.

Step 3: Look over the résumé again. Is there anything you notice this time that you didn't before? Focus in particular on typos and

inconsistent formatting. Some of the most helpful feedback you can provide is spotting a potentially disqualifying mistake.

Step 4 (Optional): After sharing your feedback with the person who created it, consider taking a look at your own résumé. Helping someone else improve their résumé might give you a few ideas for how to polish up your own.

Sentences Nobody Else Can Write

I have always asked my students to focus on the stories only they can tell.

—Alexander Chee, "So You Want to Write?" (2020)

Now that we've learned about résumé feedback, it seems appropriate to turn our attention to cover letter feedback, given that those two documents often accompany each other in the professional world. But don't make the mistake of treating résumés and cover letters as interchangeable. They have separate features and functions.

A cover letter, for example, should not simply take the same information that can be found on a résumé and organize it into paragraphs. New, humanizing details are needed. So are background information, narrative flow, and an at once lively and professional tone. The best ones also include what I consider the gold standard when it comes to distinguishing yourself: sentences nobody else can write.

A. A Show of Hands

The basic idea of creating sentences nobody else can write is that when you are competing for a job, applying to school, or in some other way trying to positively stand out, it usually helps not to sound like everybody else. "Generic" is not typically a compliment when used by hiring managers and admissions officers to describe the materials someone has submitted. Nor is "dry," "formulaic," "boring," or "cookie-cutter." If a bunch of other people can include the same statements and examples that you've included, your accomplishments and ambitions lose a good deal of force. It's not really a unique value proposition if all your peers can make the very same claim.

In my classes, we operationalize the "sentences nobody else can write" test by having someone read their cover letter or application essay out loud. After each sentence, I ask the other students in the room to raise their hand if they could put (or may even already have put) a similar sentence in their own letter or essay. If a whole bunch of hands shoot into the air, that's helpful feedback; it would be good to now revise the sentence with something more powerfully personal.

And if only one or two hands shoot up—or even better, none at all—that's helpful feedback too. The person who wrote the sentence can now be a lot more confident that they have produced something that is compellingly authentic and specific.

B. Reality Testing

When I'm working with students one-on-one, I don't have the benefit of a room full of raised hands as a feedback tool. But I still apply the "sentences nobody else can write" test. We start by going through the document line by line. The student reads each sentence aloud, and I listen for spots that seem a bit too empty and commonplace. When I find one, I'll then ask the student, "How many other people applying for the position could have written that same sentence?" Or more pointedly, "How many other people applying for the position probably *did* write that same sentence?"

The goal is to push the student to dig deeper and more strategically into their collection of skills, interests, and experiences. To help, I'll sometimes encourage them to tell me the name of someone who knows them well and is rooting for them to be selected. Their best friend from high school, perhaps. Or maybe a teacher, boss, or relative that has seen what they can accomplish and really believes in their potential.

I then ask the student for a story or detail that this cheerleader might bring up if asked to advocate on the student's behalf. What's something that they have achieved, endured, or attempted that their cheerleader would likely point to as the reason why they deserve careful consideration? What, in other words, has the student done to earn such a devoted fan?

The mental shift required to imagine the evidence someone you like and respect might use to make a case for you can be helpful, particularly for people who have been struggling with the twin bandits of self-doubt and impostor syndrome. It's similar to the "reality testing"

often used in cognitive behavioral therapy. You try to separate the student's internal feelings of inadequacy from external facts about their actual performance and abilities.[*]

The process isn't always easy. But one thing that seems to help is when I tell the student that I think they're a much more interesting and impressive candidate than the version of themselves the cover letter describes. I'm never lying when I offer this feedback. Yes, I will frequently tone down and in other ways revise individual boasts students make in their letters. Puffery, I sometimes remind them, is rarely persuasive—especially from somebody still in their 20s.

But the most common problem I see is typically not overselling. It's underselling. Bland, overused generalities take up valuable real estate. The "sentences nobody else can write" test is designed to reallocate that space to more convincingly specific material. Don't, however, interpret it as a license to be gimmicky or senselessly provocative. You don't pass the "sentences nobody else can write" test by writing sentences nobody *should* write.

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[*] We'll say more about impostor syndrome and the kind of feedback that can help combat it in Chapters 9 and 10.

Feedback Lab #8
Conversation Starters

For those who review applications, personal statements often sound numb-ingly similar.

—Jeffrey Selingo, *Who Gets in and Why:*
A Year Inside College Admissions (2020)

Background

Cover letters are by no means the only type of document that can benefit from the "sentences nobody else can write" test. Feedback on everything from research papers, to sales pitches, to grant proposals can be fruitfully framed in similar terms. In a wide variety of contexts, it can be helpful to let someone know—caringly and with plenty of time for them to revise—when the materials they've put together aren't meaningfully distinguishable from the competition.

Assignment

Consider how you might use the "sentences nobody else can write" test in the next bit of feedback you deliver, particularly if you are help-ing someone apply for a job, get into college, or launch a new product, service, or program. Here are some possible questions to guide those feedback conversations:

- **Finding a Job:** What's something that you've done in the last year that probably isn't true of the candidates you are compet-ing against? How about the last two years? The last five years? The last decade?

- **Applying to College:** What's a project, passion, or hardship that distinguishes you from other students in your school? How about from other students in your city or state?

- **Launching a Product:** What's stopping your competitors from launching a similar product, program, or service for around the same price? What would be hard for other people to replicate about your particular team, process, or design?

Feedback Flashback

The testing effect refers to the finding that tests are not merely opportunities to assess one's learning but are potent learning opportunities themselves.
—Veit Kubik, Robert Gaschler, and Hannah Hausman,
"Enhancing Student Learning in Research and Educational
Practice: The Power of Retrieval and Feedback" (2021)

It's time for our second "Feedback Flashback" quiz. This one will be twice as long as our first because we've now covered twice as much material: eight chapters instead of four.

In case it's been a while since you've read some of those chapters—particularly the ones toward the beginning of the book—here's a collection of excerpts from all eight of them.

Chapter 1: Feedback Deserts

- "Of all the times I have talked with people about the particular kind of feedback they'd like to receive, not once has the answer been 'The most generic feedback possible.'"

- "Sometimes we get stuck in feedback ruts. We offer the same generic comments from the same generic perspective using the same generic framework. That's rarely helpful to the people who have asked for our feedback. Nor is it a good way to turbocharge our own personal and professional development. Rigid, one-dimensional thinking isn't typically a great recipe for progress and growth."

Chapter 2: Keep/Cut

- "How can you improve as an athlete, a musician, a cook, a student, a parent, a boss, or even a friend if you're not given

a clear sense of what you're doing wrong, what you're doing right, and what steps are needed to reach the next level of performance? Upward trajectory is rarely fueled by generalities."

- "Once you get enough practice providing Keep/Cut feedback on other people's content, you begin to anticipate similar feedback when crafting your own content. Excess becomes easier to spot and eliminate. Key points stand out as valuable assets worth protecting. Edit by edit, your revision radar becomes both more powerful and more precise."

Chapter 3: E-D-I-T

- "Keep in mind that either set of letters [E-R-R-C or E-D-I-T] can add some much-needed structure to the feedback you give and receive. The point is to develop a balanced, multipronged way to evaluate something you or somebody else has created—whether that be a paper, a podcast, an app, a meal, or even an entire company. Then try to make that thing better, step-by-systematic-step."

- "The first three elements of the E-D-I-T framework— 'Eliminate,' 'Decrease,' and 'Increase'—are great. But they can be somewhat restrictive. They stick to either getting rid of or adding to what already exists. The 'Try' element, on the other hand, is much more versatile and inclusive. It allows you to introduce a wider range of feedback options. That creative expansion can be a big plus, especially given the concern we flagged at the beginning of the book about being stuck in a feedback rut."

Chapter 4: Self-Assessment, Self-Delusion

- "'People live in an *information environment* that does not contain all the data they need for accurate self-evaluation,'

[David Dunning and Travis Carter] explain. 'People do receive feedback as they live their lives, but if one looks at the types of feedback people get—or fail to get—one often sees that the feedback people receive tends to be . . . insufficient to guide them toward accurate impressions of self.'"

- "Hal Hershfield of UCLA's Anderson School of Management has led multiple projects in which people's commitment to saving increased when they were given an opportunity to connect with older versions of themselves. When, for example, a group of research participants between the ages of 18–35 saw digitized images of what they would look like in their seventies, they allocated about 30 percent more of their current income to retirement than a similarly aged group of participants that simply saw digitized images of their present selves. Getting a glimpse of the future can be an economically motivating form of present feedback."

Chapter 5: Challenge-Recovery

- "The language of challenge and recovery can give you a way to frame many other types of feedback."

- "If you don't get your own challenge-recovery balance right, the quality of the feedback you give other people can suffer, as can your ability to productively process the feedback that's sent your way. If, for example, you've just had three straight challenge-heavy months, weeks, days, or even individual meetings, you might not have the mental and emotional reserves to sit down with a poorly performing team member to share what people find so hard about working with them. Nor, when you head home from the office that night, are you likely to be in the mood to hear from your spouse or

roommate that you need to start contributing more around the house."

Chapter 6: Noise Pollution

- "The teachers were evaluating identical student responses to questions about theorems, bisecting angles, and the hypotenuse of a triangle—yet they gave those responses widely different grades. That's not bias. (There was no identifying information about the students' race, gender, or other characteristics the teachers could have been improperly influenced by.) That, alarmingly, is noise."

- "One complaint about performance reviews—especially those that happen only once a year—is the time lag involved. The reviews come long after the person being reviewed could have used the instruction and guidance the process is designed to provide."

Chapter 7: Breadth and Depth

- "Approach résumé feedback with an eye toward both framing information that is already there and creating information that will at some point be good to include. Think of it as a way of strategically looking both backward (at what the person has done) and forward (at what they might want to do) all at the same time."

- "This Feedback Lab provides a framework that can be used both when a résumé will be given only a brief glance and when it will be treated with more careful scrutiny. The framework, which I often use with my students, is called '6-60-6.'"

Chapter 8: Sentences Nobody Else Can Write

- "A cover letter . . . should not simply take the same information that can be found on a résumé and organize it into paragraphs. New, humanizing details are needed. So are background information, narrative flow, and an at once lively and professional tone."

- "In my classes, we operationalize the 'sentences nobody else can write' test by having someone read their cover letter or application essay out loud. After each sentence, I ask the other students in the room to raise their hand if they could put (or may even already have put) a similar sentence in their own letter or essay. If a whole bunch of hands shoot into the air, that's helpful feedback; it would be good to now revise the sentence with something more powerfully personal."

Quiz

1. All but one of the options below describe an example of "occasion noise." Identify the one that *doesn't*.

   (A) "Judges located in the American South assigned significantly longer sentences than their counterparts in other parts of the country."

   (B) "When wine experts at a major US wine competition tasted the same wines twice, they scored only 18% of the wines identically (usually the very worst ones)."

   (C) "Experienced software consultants can offer markedly different estimates of the completion time for the same task on two occasions."

2. Someone who is "T-Shaped" has both _____.

(A) feedback ruts and feedback deserts

(B) breadth and depth

(C) something to keep and something to cut

3. Deloitte is a professional services company with over 300,000 employees and more than 150 offices around the world. Known as one of the "Big Four" accounting firms, it also helps clients with issues relating to everything from health care, to marketing, to mergers and acquisitions.

   In 2017, the company published an article called "Avoiding the Feedback Monsters" on its website. Excerpts from the article are included below. Which one best aligns with the idea that effective feedback is *behavioral*? (Our definition of behavioral: the feedback focuses on concrete steps the person can take to improve, not fundamental aspects of their personality they need to radically transform.)

(A) "Bad news must be carefully crafted, have the right person delivering it, and take into account the organization's propensity to sugarcoat or distort information."

(B) "A recent Bersin by Deloitte report says that organizations achieve a 21 percent boost in business results when leaders embrace a culture of coaching. Another study conducted by the *Harvard Business Review* said that employee engagement suffers when leaders are unable to deliver effective feedback. It found a direct correlation between employees who averaged in the bottom 25th percentile in terms of organizational

commitment, job satisfaction, and desire to stay and those who ranked their leaders lowest at providing quality feedback."

(C) "Rather than choosing to believe the receiver is battling an innate, immutable character flaw, [feedback givers] can try to approach the encounter through a skill-building lens, framing the message in a way that would help receivers handle similar situations more favorably in the future."

4. **True or False:** The E-D-I-T framework can't be unbundled. It only works if you complete all four steps together.

5. Each of the following statements appears in the book *Out of Office: The Big Problem and Bigger Promise of Working from Home* by Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Petersen, a pair of journalists who made the jump to working remotely in 2017, moving from New York City to Missoula, Montana—and then eventually to a small island off the coast of the state of Washington.

   Pick the statement that best captures the idea of "challenge and recovery."

   (A) "[Most managers] either micromanage needlessly, because they know no other way to make their work visible or meaningful, or they treat managing the way their managers do: as an afterthought. Employees are left desperate for feedback."

   (B) "When you get a good night's sleep, you're better at basically everything. When you take rest days, you're a better athlete. The restoration we find in hobbies can make us better partners, better friends, better listeners and collaborators, just overall better people to be around."

(C) "Having more meetings doesn't decrease stress, because [meetings] rarely accomplish the things that would actually decrease your stress, like completing a task or having clear and cogent feedback about your completion of that task."

6. Which of the following options was *not* mentioned as one of the three characteristics of a "feedback desert"?

(A) You rarely get quality feedback.

(B) You've never been taught how to provide useful feedback to other people or, importantly, to yourself.

(C) The people giving you feedback try to avoid using "blur" words and instead focus on concrete data points.

Answers Explained

1. **The answer that does not describe an example of occasion noise is (A): "Judges located in the American South assigned significantly longer sentences than their counterparts in other parts of the country."** This example illustrates the concept of "level noise": different evaluators apply different standards of severity. Think, for instance, of teachers or supervisors that are "tough graders" versus those that are "easy graders."

    Occasion noise, in contrast, is when the same evaluator makes a different judgment at separate times.

    For a review of occasion noise, take another look at Chapter 6.

2. **(B) Someone who is T-Shaped has both breadth and depth.** The horizontal part of the "T" represents breadth. The vertical part represents depth.

    For a review of being T-Shaped, take another look at Chapter 7.

3. **(C) The correct answer is the one that encourages people to frame their feedback not as targeting "an innate, immutable character flaw" but through a "skill-building lens."** The article offers the following example: "A team member, Jill, provides great content in her presentations, but her slides are excessively detailed and difficult to follow. Instead of focusing on how 'wordy' Jill is, her manager could adopt more of a coaching approach, suggesting to Jill that she augment and improve the impact of the message by adding some eye-catching graphics to each slide."

    For a review of the importance of behavioral feedback, take another look at Chapter 2.

4. **False.** The Feedback Lab called "À La Carte" mentioned that a helpful feature of the E-D-I-T framework is that it can be unbundled. You can separate the steps. You can mix and match. It's not an all-or-nothing operation.

    For a review of the E-D-I-T framework, take another look at Chapter 3.

5. **The correct answer is (B): "When you get a good night's sleep, you're better at basically everything."** Warzel and Petersen add that "hobbies help cultivate essential parts of us that have been suffocated by productivity obsessions and proliferating obligations. The hobby itself ultimately matters far less than what its existence provides: a means of tilting your identity away from [being merely a] 'person who is good at doing a lot of work.'"

    For a review of the challenge-recovery balance, take another look at Chapter 4.

6. **The correct answer is (C): "The people giving you feedback try to avoid using 'blur' words and instead focus on concrete data points."** "Blur" words, the cognitive psychologist LeeAnn Renninger

explains in "The Secret to Giving Good Feedback," are words that are problematically unspecific and may mean different things to different people. It's unlikely you are in a feedback desert if the people giving you feedback try to avoid using them.

For a review of what constitutes a feedback desert, take another look at Chapter 1.

Impostor Syndrome

Virginia Woolf imagined that people . . .
were jeering at her. The sun picked
her out like a searchlight. She heard
the rooks crying, "Fraud! Fraud!"

—Sigrid Nunez, *Mitz* (1998)

The previous two chapters focused on résumés, cover letters, and other application materials. They highlighted the importance of breadth, depth, and being T-Shaped, as well as the benefits of encouraging people (including ourselves) to come up with sentences nobody else can write.

None of these terms and techniques, of course, will guarantee that the feedback you provide someone will help them land their dream job or get accepted to their first-choice school. Decisions about hiring and admissions are both too context-specific to permit anything close to that kind of promise.

With any luck, though, the conceptual vocabulary that we've been building will at least make it a little easier to productively structure the comments you offer. Organized, purposeful feedback tends to be much more useful than a random, rambling collection of thoughts.

A more systematic approach can also help address something that can be difficult to navigate in many feedback situations, both for the person giving the feedback and the person receiving it: impostor syndrome.

A. Phenomenon → Syndrome → Experience

Impostor syndrome is characterized by self-doubt, insecurity, and the persistent fear that you'll soon be exposed as a fraud. You worry that people will discover that you don't deserve whatever position, responsibilities, or recognition you've been given—that you're unqualified and don't belong. One of the more commonly quoted descriptions of it is attributed to literary legend Maya Angelou: "I have written eleven books, but each time I think 'Uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out.'"

Or consider the following confession from *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg, who helped grow Facebook (now "Meta") into one of the biggest companies in the world during her 14-year tenure as its chief operating officer. "Every time I was called on in class," she writes of

her experience as an undergraduate at Harvard, "I was sure that I was about to embarrass myself. Every time I took a test, I was sure that it had gone badly. And every time I didn't embarrass myself—or even excelled—I believed that I had fooled everyone yet again. One day soon, the jig would be up."

That Angelou and Sandberg both identify as female reflects the origins of the term *impostor syndrome*. Research on the topic started in the 1970s, when a clinical psychologist named Pauline Rose Clance began to notice a concerning pattern among a set of female students at Oberlin College who had come to her for counseling. Despite earning good grades, performing well on standardized tests, and having loads of impressive accomplishments, many of these students battled persistent thoughts that their success was a fluke and that they'd soon be discovered as frauds and told to leave.

"I saw these people who had gone to the best schools, often private schools, had highly educated parents and excellent standardized test scores, grades, and letters of recommendation," Clance recalled in a 2016 interview with *Slate*. "But here they were saying things like, 'I'm afraid I'm going to flunk this exam.' 'Somehow the admissions committee made an error.' 'I'm an Oberlin mistake.'"

Clance, who says she suffered through similar fears in graduate school, eventually teamed up with another psychologist, Suzanne Imes, and the two of them published "The Impostor Phenomenon in High-Achieving Women" in the journal *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* in 1979. It was the first time the term *impostor phenomenon*—which Clance and Imes coined together—appeared in print.

Since then, the prevalence of feeling like an impostor has been found to stretch across gender, race, and geography, as well as all manners of professions, skill sets, and educational levels. Here, for example, is a sample of just some of the groups covered by a systematic review of the topic by a team of researchers led by Dena Bravata of

Stanford Medical School in 2019. They looked at 62 studies involving a combined total of over 14,000 participants:

- German managers

- Iranian physicians

- Canadian middle-schoolers

- Korean Catholics

- American nurses

- Australian lawyers

This broad range is a big reason that Clance regrets that the original term "impostor *phenomenon*" is now often referred to as "impostor *syndrome*." "If I could do it all over again," she has said, "I would call it the impostor *experience*, because it's not a syndrome or a complex or a mental illness, it's something almost everyone experiences."

B. Fortifying Feedback

Feedback has an important role to play in the fight against impostorism and its many toxic by-products—isolation, dread, depression, drops in motivation, negative self-talk. In 2013, for example, one of the American Psychological Association's official publications, *gradPSYCH* magazine, ran a cover story called "Feel like a Fraud?" that highlighted the stabilizing power that the right kind of feedback can provide. "The thing that made so much difference was supportive, encouraging supervision," explained a graduate student interviewed for the story.

He was describing how he managed to regain his confidence after a dramatic slump in the opposite direction. In high school and college, he had excelled. But when he made the jump to pursuing an advanced degree in clinical psychology and having to actually work

with patients, he began to struggle with a set of identity-shaking questions about his capabilities and whether he had even chosen the right career. "There's a sense of being thrown into the deep end of the pool and needing to learn to swim," he said. "But I wasn't just questioning whether I could survive. In a fundamental way, I was asking, 'Am I a swimmer?'"

The guidance and reassurance he received were key parts of how he recovered his sense of self and purpose. Feedback that targets impostor syndrome in particular can be tremendously fortifying.

So in the upcoming Feedback Lab, we'll learn some techniques that can provide that form of support, including a few Clance and Imes suggest in their original article. Their initial insights continue to be valuable resources.

Feedback Lab #9
Feedback Fixes

There are ways to overcome feeling like an impostor—beginning by recognizing that it's more than just a feeling.

—Jessica Bennett, "How to Overcome Impostor Syndrome" (2022)

Background

Here are a few strategies that Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes recommend when helping someone overcome feeling like an impostor. I've framed them in categories that highlight the type of feedback involved. I've also slightly edited the pronouns to reflect the current, wider understanding of who experiences impostor thoughts.

Peer Feedback: "A group therapy setting or an interactional group in which there are some other high achieving people experiencing the impostor phenomenon is highly recommended. If one person is willing to share their secret, others are able to share theirs. The participants are . . . astonished and relieved to find they are not alone."

Reality-Testing Feedback: "A group setting is also valuable because one person can see the dynamics in another person and recognize the lack of reality involved. Alex cannot believe that Erin and Casey think they are stupid. After all, Erin and Casey have PhDs from an outstanding university, are respected professors, and are obviously bright. In a group setting, the ways in which an individual negates positive feedback and maintains their belief system emerge in clear relief and can be brought to the attention of the client."

Positive Feedback: "A helpful homework assignment is to have the client keep a record of positive feedback they receive about their competence and how they keep themselves from accepting

this feedback. After they become aware of how they deny compliments, they are instructed to experiment with doing the opposite—to listen, to take in the positive response, and to get as much nourishment as possible out of it."

Assignment

Try at least one of Clance and Imes's strategies. Consider, for example, putting together an informal lunch where new members of your organization, team, or program get the chance to hear people with more experience and accomplishments talk about their own feelings of impostorism, particularly when they were just starting out. As the importance Clance and Imes put on peer-to-peer interactions suggests, learning that other high-achievers struggle with the same internal doubts that you do can be a helpfully validating form of feedback.

Another option is Clance and Imes's idea of creating a log or diary of positive feedback. There is a growing amount of evidence that "gratitude journals"—where you take a little time each day to write down things you're grateful for—can boost people's well-being. Perhaps a "feedback journal" can as well.

In case, however, none of the interventions Clance and Imes describe resonate with you, here are a few more from a mix of other sources:

Cleveland Clinic Medical Center: "Turn impostor syndrome on its head: Remember that smart, high-achieving people most often deal with impostor syndrome. So the very fact that you recognize it in yourself says a lot about you. 'True impostors don't have this feeling,' Dr. [Susan] Albers states. Let that be motivation to continue pushing forward."

Harvard Business Review: "Awareness is the first step to change, so ensure you track these thoughts [of impostorism]: what they are and when they emerge."

British Psychological Society: "Rather than framing imposter feelings as an internal phenomenon, it may be more helpful to think about those barriers that stand in the way of certain people feeling comfortable and successful in their fields—and to try to break those barriers down."

Impostor Upside

By leaning into the feelings of inadequacy—rather than trying to resist or overcome them—and putting extra effort into communication, impostors can actually outperform their non-impostor peers in interpersonal skills.

—Peter Rubinstein, "The Hidden Upside of Impostor Syndrome" (2021)

We're not done with impostor syndrome. Given its prevalence—one study estimated that 70 percent of people experienced forms of it during their career—a single chapter of tips probably isn't sufficient. So we'll close this first volume of *Feedback Loops* by exploring an additional impostor-related insight, one that I hope will be as encouraging as it is surprising: there can be an upside to feeling like an impostor.

A. Fraud and Fuel

The insight derives from the work of Basima Tewfik, a professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management. In a series of four studies, Tewfik found that there may be certain performance benefits—particularly in interpersonal domains—to having impostor thoughts. In the first study, a set of financial advisors who were experiencing impostor thoughts were rated as better collaborators by their supervisors than were financial advisors in the same firm who weren't experiencing impostor thoughts.

A similar impostor advantage occurred in the second study. A group of medical students who were experiencing impostor thoughts received higher ratings for bedside manner than did students who weren't experiencing impostor thoughts. They leaned in when engaging with patients. They made more frequent eye contact. They showed more skill as listeners and communicated a greater sense of compassion.

The other two studies involved job interviews—and again, the people experiencing impostor thoughts outperformed the control group. The questions they asked were rated as more engaging than the ones asked by people who weren't experiencing impostor thoughts, and their answers to the interviewer's questions were considered more appealing.

Tewfik attributes these results to what she calls "other-focused orientation." If you're afraid you aren't as intelligent and capable as your

peers, you might work extra hard to be conscientious, collaborative, and kind. You'll try to compensate for your perceived inadequacy by doubling down on effort and empathy.

The organizational psychologist Adam Grant,[*] who writes about Tewfik's findings in his bestselling book *Think Again*, explains the effect this way: "Impostor thoughts can be a source of fuel. [They] can motivate us to work harder to prove ourselves and work smarter to fill gaps in our knowledge and skills." He adds that "instead of holding us back, [these thoughts] can propel us forward."

Preet Bharara, the former US attorney for the Southern District of New York who earned a spot on *Time* magazine's "World's Most Influential People" list in 2012, makes a similar point in *Doing Justice*, his memoir about the time he spent as one of the most powerful prosecutors in the country. "Self-doubt in moderation is animating and motivating," he explains. "Leaders who have purged themselves of all self-doubt will not be leaders for long, and in my view, are dangerous while in command. I learned, over time, that self-doubt is my friend, and arrogance my enemy."

B. Burdens and Benefits

Tewfik is careful not to romanticize impostor thoughts or dismiss the psychological harm they create. Even though having these thoughts can boost your performance, that doesn't mean their net effect is positive. She certainly doesn't recommend that bosses try to increase their

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[*] We talked about Adam Grant in Chapter 6, when learning about "occasion noise" and the inconsistent results of his Myers-Briggs personality tests.

employee's productivity by making everyone feel like frauds. That's not savvy leadership. That's mental abuse.

What she does recommend, however, is taking a more nuanced approach to addressing impostor thoughts. Yes, we should acknowledge and work hard to lessen the burdens of imposter thoughts. But we should also be open to—and learn to take advantage of—their potential benefits. All that fraud-fueled anxiety could very well be a tremendous interpersonal asset.

Feedback Lab #10
Reframing Fraud

The key to the [technique] is to be open to the possibility that you are, in fact, at least a little bit excited about what you think you're anxious about. Could something good come about as a result?

—Jane McGonigal, *Superbetter* (2016)

Background

As part of her effort to change how people relate to impostor thoughts, Basima Tewfik suggests a helpful technique: "cognitive reappraisal."

The process involves reframing a stimulus in order to alter how you respond to it. One example is encouraging anxious public speakers to relabel their nervousness as "excitement." An experiment by Alison Wood Brooks of the Harvard Business School suggests that this tactic can increase the confidence and competence that speakers project as well as improve their overall persuasiveness.

A bad—though unfortunately common—strategy is to tell the speakers to try to ignore the obvious stress they're experiencing. Saying "Picture something peaceful" or "Just breathe" are not helpful admonitions when preperformance butterflies are swirling. As a *Scientific American* podcast that covered Brooks's research put it, "People who try to relax away their performance anxiety actually mess up more than folks who just give in to the excitement."

So instead of (futilely) attempting to banish the butterflies, a better approach is to interpret the butterflies' presence as a sign that there's now a bit of extra performance energy to draw on. The butterflies, when properly reappraised, can be a boost—not a burden.

Assignment

The cognitive reappraisal that Basima Tewfik has in mind would help take the emotional sting—and professional panic—out of impostor

thoughts. "In receiving messaging that emphasizes potential upsides," she writes, "those with workplace impostor thoughts may be able to down-regulate negative responses in the moment." In other words, when you learn that there might be benefits to these kinds of thoughts, their existence becomes significantly less threatening. You don't have to see them as a sign that you have no business pursuing your current career path. You can instead reframe them as a perfectly normal response to a challenging situation as well as an opportunity to show-case a valuable set of interpersonal skills.

This final Feedback Lab gives you a chance to practice the cognitive reappraisal that Tewfik recommends. The next time you (or people you are giving feedback to) struggle with impostor thoughts, try reframing those thoughts in a more positive light. To give you some ideas of how you might do that, here are two examples.

1. Confident Humility and Capability to Learn

The first example comes from Scott Galloway, a professor of marketing at NYU who, in addition to founding several companies, has served on the board of directors of Eddie Bauer, the *New York Times*, and the UC Berkeley Haas School of Business. He suggests reframing impostor thoughts as an opportunity to demonstrate "confident humility" and your "capability to learn." "In those moments where you feel like an imposter," he explained on an episode of *Pivot*, the podcast he hosts with the tech journalist Kara Swisher, "you realize 'I have something to prove,' so you're not complacent. Hey, you know what, this might be a moment for confident humility where I can recognise how little I know and yet have a strong conviction in my capability to learn."

2. Chance to Be Useful

The second example comes from a magazine profile of Adam Tooze, an economic historian at Columbia who directs the European

Institute and was named one of the top global thinkers of the 2010s by *Foreign Policy* magazine. The profile revealed that when Tooze was invited to deliver a prestigious lecture to a large, distinguished audience in 2022, he suffered a major dose of impostor thoughts. The idea of having to get up in front of all those smart and impressive people prompted a rush of, in Tooze's words, "incomprehension and panic and almost shame."

Fortunately, though, Tooze and a psychoanalyst he regularly sees soon devised a reframe: treat the lecture as a chance to be useful. Not brilliant. Not clever. Not daringly original, provocative, or any other unhelpfully high standard that makes academia an especially pernicious producer of imposter thoughts. Nope, Tooze was simply going to focus on being useful, like a neighbor who's been asked to lend their particular expertise to a community food drive or bake sale.

The shift in mindset was so effective that Tooze now considers the "be useful" technique to be his primary stabilizing device—not just when he is invited to give lectures but also when he embarks on other intellectual endeavors, like writing books. "I'm no longer, I would say, principally driven by striving for distinctiveness or radical originality," he explained. He then added, describing his 2021 book *Shutdown: How Covid Shook the World's Economy*, that the "purpose of that book is to be useful. People need to understand what happened in the bond market [in 2020], and most people don't. So let's really explain it and link it up to all the other things that happened and provide a map. And write that book, and write it quickly, and get it out, and like—it's useful."

EPILOGUE

CAVEAT AND CONTINUATION

Basima Tewfik's suggestion that cognitive reappraisal might be one way to combat impostor thoughts comes with an important caveat: relying solely on cognitive reappraisal might unrealistically—and unfairly—place all the responsibility for those thoughts on the person experiencing them.

The technique is certainly not designed to ignore the inescapable influence of one's environment. If the message you're constantly getting from the people, processes, and structures that surround you is "You don't belong here," even the most creative, persistent reframing in the world will be of little help. There's not much of an impostor upside to toxic workplaces, classrooms, and family dynamics.

The writer and activist Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez makes this point well in "Assimilation and Erasure: How Impostor Syndrome Traps People of Color." Describing the not-always welcoming academic path she had to navigate on her way to earning a master's degree in theology from a prestigious university, Mojica Rodríguez recalls an observation made by Dawn X. Henderson, who has led equity and inclusion efforts at both Duke and the University of North Carolina: "While Black and Latino students are not intellectual frauds, the education system often transmits messages that suggest the opposite."

Mojica Rodríguez then adds some specific examples. "I couldn't help but see that message—you do not belong—everywhere," she notes. "I once mispronounced a word, which I had only ever read but had never heard said out loud, in a question during a lecture, and my professor giggled and corrected me under his breath, in front of the entire class. I remember being asked if I even knew how to write, by a teaching fellow in a discussion group in front of twenty of my peers. I remember my classmates using obscure academic references I had never heard before." These and other slights lead Rodríguez to conclude that "the ivory tower is ivory for a reason; it is not ebony, it is not the color of honey, and I was never meant to thrive there."

In an article for the *Harvard Business Review*, Ruchika Tulshyan and Jodi-Ann Burey identify similarly pernicious signals in corporate settings. "Even if women demonstrate strength, ambition, and resilience," they explain, "our daily battles with microaggressions, especially expectations and assumptions formed by stereotypes and racism, often push us down. Impostor syndrome as a concept fails to capture this dynamic and puts the onus on women to deal with its effects."

Tulshyan and Burey therefore recommend that people stop telling women that they have imposter syndrome. (That's actually the title of their article: "Stop Telling Women That They Have Imposter Syndrome.") The focus instead should be on creating a supportive and inclusive organizational culture, one that reduces the experiences that produce impostor thoughts in the first place, especially for folks who are already dealing with other forms of marginalization—such as women, people of color, and people with disabilities.

So in the second volume of *Feedback Loops*, we'll cover a number of feedback strategies that can serve as helpful forms of social support. If you decide to check it out, I'll take that as a wonderful kind of feedback that you found this first volume at least a little bit useful.

THANK-YOUS

Gratitude makes us appreciate the value of something, and when we appreciate the value of something . . . we're less likely to take it for granted.

—Robert Emmons, "Why Gratitude Is Good" (2010)

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