Redux: The Art and Science of Feedback

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 389

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Giving feedback is a responsibility and, as we said, a privilege and, we'll also say, a potential liability for learning businesses. A liability because, while feedback is so critical to learning, it's hard to do well.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:19] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:20] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:29] Welcome to episode 389, which focuses on feedback. This is an encore airing of an episode from our archives.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:36] It's not unusual to be asked for feedback by a colleague. Nor is it unusual to be offered feedback. These are in fact often daily occurrences.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:46] But giving and receiving feedback is arguably harder than most people think. It's an art and a science. And it's important that learning professionals take the time to study that art and science because of the critical role that feedback plays in learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:00] So we want to revisit a conversation Jeff and I originally had in 2019 that delves into the topic of feedback, including how to effectively give and receive it, common misconceptions around it, and the tremendous impact it can have on learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:17] We'll note that in the conversation that follows you'll hear some references to the show notes for the original episode, 209, but you'll find the most recent show notes and a transcript at leadinglearning.com/episode389.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:40] Jeff, what did you think of my last interview for the podcast? I'm looking for some feedback.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:46] That's a question we hear a lot, and it's not unusual to be asked for feedback by a colleague or a friend.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:53] Yes, and it's not all that uncommon to be offered feedback. Even if we don't ask for it, we might get unsolicited feedback, whether from a boss, a colleague, or a friend. As in, "Hey Jeff, I have a few thoughts to share on your last podcast interview. Let me give you some feedback."

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:10] Yes, it seems like you always get that feedback you're not necessarily looking for, but giving and receiving feedback is arguably a lot harder than most people assume. It's an art and a science, and it's really important that learning professionals take the time to learn that art and science.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:29] Feedback is an incredibly important part of learning. A few episodes ago, in episode 203, you and I talked about metalearning moves learning businesses can make to empower lifelong learning, and providing opportunities for feedback was one of the seven most important metalearning moves that we covered.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:48] And so, now, in follow-up to that, we want to devote some more airtime to feedback. In fact, we're going to dedicate today's entire show to feedback. So here are a couple of suggestions for what to key in on while listening. First, think about the feedback you typically offer your learners. As you listen to our conversation, think about whether the feedback you offer is consistent with what's known about how to foster learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:15] Second, as we talk about the many different types of feedback, think about which ones you do and don't use. After the episode, think about whether it might be beneficial to change the types of feedback you offer. Would codifying approaches to different types of the feedback be valuable? Now that you have those questions in mind—and, by the way, those are questions you can find in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode209—let's dig in in earnest. Let's start by defining our key term here: *feedback*. According to Merriam-Webster, feedback is "the transmission of evaluative or corrective information about an action, event, or process to the original or controlling source." And feedback is "also the information so transmitted."

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:04] I think the "evaluative or corrective" nature is key. In the context of learning, that's going to be evaluation or correction about skills or knowledge being learned, and, of course, the original source is going to be the learner herself.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:19] I had a university professor, an English teacher, who hated the term *feedback*. He thought that term should be used for its original, scientific meaning only. But I think, at this point, the feedback horse is out of the barn because Merriam-Webster lists the definition that I just shared first, meaning it's more popular than that scientific meaning of the "return to the input of a part of the output of a machine, system, or process." And I think there's not a lot of benefit in trying to pull back on that broadened sense, and so I think we should forge ahead using that term. And I'll note too that the university professor would also have really disliked that horse-out-of-the-barn cliché.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:01] Yes, university professors can be finicky that way. Maybe we'll continue and mix some metaphors here and put that barn on a two-way street because feedback, of course, has two sides. There's giving feedback, and there's receiving feedback. We're going to spend most of our time today on giving feedback because that's a responsibility and, frankly, a privilege that learning businesses usually fulfill. But we'll start by touching briefly on asking for feedback because, as lifelong learners, that side of the feedback skill set is worth working on too.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:36] It definitely is, and I'll draw on a personal example here. I like to write poetry, and I've attended a number of poetry workshops over the years. I would say the vast majority of them have an instructor, and you might have 10 or so other poets in the room, and you just give feedback on whatever poem is put in front of you, and you give it to that person. Well, a few years ago, I had a different experience, one where the instructor had the poet whose poem was being critiqued, say upfront what type of feedback she was looking for. So I might say, "I'm really interested in knowing if the ending to this poem is working well," and so then that lets all of the other people giving feedback in the room know to look at that ending and to really focus their time and attention there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:26] I've had a similar experience. I've done a lot of work at Heroic Public Speaking, which is a company run by Michael and Amy Port, where they focus on, as you might expect, helping speakers become much better at what they do. And one of their rules there is that you can be a performer or a critic, but you can't be both. And so, when anybody's participating in their programs, we're told, "You do not offer unsolicited feedback. You only offer feedback that's specifically requested by the person speaking." As you can imagine, most speakers are very good at criticizing other speakers. So you have to really start thinking about, "Okay, how do I get the feedback that's really going to make me better, ask for what I need at this specific time, on this specific speech in this specific context? Is it working? Is it not

working?" and helping the people who are in teams and groups with you, going through the training, really give you the support that you need in your learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:25] So asking for feedback or—perhaps even more relevant for learning businesses—letting or encouraging learners to ask for feedback often works best at either end of the learner journey, for the novice or for the approaching expert learner. For the novice, there's often so much corrective feedback that could be given that it might be overwhelming to the learner. So letting the learner pick where the people giving feedback should focus can help limit the sheer volume of feedback to a more manageable amount. As an example, let's say there's a novice tennis player. Maybe she has a bad backhand, a weak forehand, and a serve that's unreliable. But that's a lot, to work on all of those. So the player might say she wants to focus on serving and ask for pointers on that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:15] I know you were secretly thinking of me with that novice tennis player example, but I could certainly use some pointers. But, like you said, that's one end of the spectrum, the novice. And then, for somebody who basically is an expert or is approaching that level of expertise, already has a lot of knowledge, a lot of skill, asking for feedback on a particular area can then really increase the odds that the feedback prompts action or elicits the kind of change that that person's seeking. An advanced tennis player may not really care that much about improving her serve. Maybe she's skilled enough that she knows she can consistently put the ball in play, and that's good enough for her at this point. But she might feel that she really needs to put her time and energy into improving her backhand, for example.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:00] And so, if you're going to ask for feedback or if you're going to create learning experiences like the Heroic Public Speaking workshops and the poetry workshops we mentioned, if you're going to create those experiences where you encourage learners to ask for the feedback they need or want, it's a really good idea to provide an example to model. So the poetry workshop that I shared about, that instructor modeled it for us. He said, "Let's imagine that Theodore Roethke is here. He's brought his poem "My Papa's Waltz" with him. It's a great poem, by the way. Look it up. You can easily Google it if you don't know it. And what Ted says to the class is, "I'm trying to walk this line between nostalgia and the terror, and I want to make sure that I'm not falling too much on one side or the other. Am I walking that line effectively?"

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:52] Yes. So definitely getting very specific about that. And whoever is hearing the feedback—whether that's you or another learner or, in the case of a structured-type learning experience, the instructor or facilitator, whoever that is—needs to be ready to redirect the

feedback-givers if needed to make it more productive. Or, if that doesn't work, you should recognize that you or any other learner can always ignore the feedback if needed.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:19] That's right. Feedback really is always up to the receiver. Even really good feedback can only be conveyed. It can only be transmitted, to go back to that word that was used in the Merriam-Webster definition we started with earlier. The feedback won't necessarily be internalized, adopted, or put to use. It's always up to the learner whether or not she's going to apply that feedback, whether or not she's going to make changes based on it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:48] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you're looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:18] And now on to the other side of the road—I feel like there's a chicken joke in there somewhere—but getting to that other side of the road, giving feedback. Giving feedback is a responsibility and, as we said, a privilege and, we'll also say, a potential liability for learning businesses. A liability because, while feedback is so critical to learning, it's hard to do well.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:42] Yes, it is hard to do well, and the feedback needs to be focused on improved performance. In the case of learning businesses, opportunities for feedback should focus on improving the learner so that the learner better understands the skills and information being taught and is better able to apply those skills and information. The corrective and evaluative nature of feedback needs to keep that goal of improved performance in mind, meaning you might have something that you can correct, but, if it's not really achieving that goal of improved performance, that might be feedback better left unsaid.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:19] Yes, you keep that goal of improved learner performance in mind, and it's pretty easy to see that, yes, indeed, there is such a thing as unnecessary feedback, gratuitous feedback, even just plain bad feedback. Anything that undermines improved learner performance is counterproductive, and it's not hard to imagine—or perhaps even remember—examples of feedback gone awry. Feedback about how distracting someone's facial expressions are while speaking turns into not more pleasant facial expressions but results in that person not

speaking up as much, not presenting events at events, and so on. It's completely counterproductive.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:57] Right. We have to keep the goal of improved learner performance in mind. Add to that the fact that feedback really needs to take that learner and that situation into account. You really want to be thinking about individual learners when possible. And, if it's not possible to give feedback that specialized, that individualized, then you're going to want to look at types of learners. For example, novice versus expert or native English speaker versus non-native English speaker. Knowing who's receiving the feedback allows us to structure it in a way most likely to achieve that goal of improved performance. More expert learners are likely to be able to process nuanced feedback and feedback on a variety of aspects. Novice learners may be overwhelmed by too much feedback and may need help understanding what to do with the feedback. For example, a recommendation to a novice public speaker to be more engaging might not be as meaningful as that recommendation coupled with some examples of how to be more engaging, use more stories, or make use of strategic movement on the stage. We need to be more directive with novices, and we need to be more facilitative in our feedback to more experienced learners. We'll include in the show notes a link to an article by Dr. Patti Shank. It includes a table that really nicely summarizes how to handle feedback differently at the different ends of the skill and expertise continuum.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:33] It's also important to keep in mind what the feedback's focused on, what it's addressing. The feedback on a knowable, reproducible task or procedure—for example, something like giving an injection, if you're in the health care space—it's going to be different than feedback on a more open-ended topic, something like being a more strategic thinker. With the knowable task, the corrective side of feedback factors in. There's a right way to give an injection, and you want to make sure that learners get that. You don't want people out there giving bad injections. But, with the more open-ended topics, the feedback will be more evaluative than corrective. There's not a single right way to be a strategic thinker, but there are some things you can say or do that might point a learner in the right direction—hints, cues, details that might get her thinking or experimenting.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:26] In addition to being aware of the individuals and the situations that the feedback pertains to, there are also various dimensions of feedback. From formal—think assessments, like a certification exam—to informal—the more insignificant day-to-day exchanges. Even the quick, unfiltered expression that I can see on your face, Jeff, when I suggest a particular topic for a podcast, that counts as feedback.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:54] Definitely. And there's also a feedback spectrum that runs from formative to summative.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:01] And there's solicited versus unsolicited feedback and, of course, shades of gray in between those two extremes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:07] There's who's giving the feedback. Is it coming from a teacher or an expert? Is it coming from peers? Peers with more experience or less? Or is the feedback coming from the learner herself, maybe through reflection or other activities and experimentation?

Celisa Steele: [00:16:22] And, of course, there's the spirit of the feedback. Is it positive, constructive, supportive, or is it negative and remedial?

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:31] Is it direct, written, or spoken? Is it implicit, like body language? Is it straightforward and clear or couched beyond parsability to preserve the appearance of politesse?

Celisa Steele: [00:16:43] With so many variables to feedback, it's easy to see how quickly it becomes complicated and why some folks have pushed back on the idea of feedback ever being valuable.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:55] Yes. There was a recent *Harvard Business Review* post on the blog there—we'll link to that in the show notes—called "The Feedback Fallacy." The writers there wrote, and I'll quote them: "Feedback is about telling people what we think of their performance and how they should do it better, whether they're giving an effective presentation, leading a team, or creating a strategy. And on that, the research is clear. Telling people what we think of their performance doesn't help them thrive and excel. And telling people how we think they should improve actually hinders learning."

Celisa Steele: [00:17:31] Those authors go on to point out what they see as three fallacies around feedback. First, that other people are more aware than you are of your own weaknesses, and that the best way to help you is for them to point out what you can't see for yourself. Second, that the process of learning is the filling of an empty vessel. You lack certain abilities that you need to acquire, and so you're going to get feedback that's going to teach them to you. Then, third, that great performance—getting to that expert end of the spectrum—is universal, analyzable, and describable, and so, once you have it defined, then it can be transferred from one person to another. Someone who's an expert can pass that along to someone else who can

then also become an expert. But, of course, all of those points are flawed. Others don't always see us more clearly or understand what we need to do, and, by sharing what they see and what they think we need to do, we may actually move farther away from doing something well. I'll note that this is probably truer for higher-order learning and for learning that aims not just for competence but mastery or, in the language of the *HBR* authors, "excellence." For giving an injection properly, to return to that example, others may well be able to help learners do that better.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:01] We should note too that there is some basic neuroscience behind what the authors of that *HBR* article claim around feedback. There are studies showing, for example, that in the brains of students that are asked about what they need to correct in something that they're doing, their sympathetic nervous system lights up and their fight-or-flight system comes online, and it tends to mute the other parts of the brain and makes them focus only on the information that's most necessary to survive. So your brain is narrowing its activity, is sensing a threat from the criticism that's often perceived through feedback. Now, on the flip side, if we're able to highlight for somebody what's working in what they're doing, what's working in their learning, that can stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, which is much more productive. That's going to lead to neurogenesis, to the growth of brain cells. The authors' view is that learning really rests on our grasp of what we're doing well, not on what we're doing poorly—and definitely not on someone else's sense of what we're doing poorly—and then also that we learn the most when someone else pays attention to what's working within us and asks us to cultivate that intelligently. That's the best kind of feedback.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:32] For example, if you see somebody doing something that's really working, stop and highlight that, and recognize that, and point out what excellence looks like for that person. If you do that, then you're offering her a chance to gain some insight. You're highlighting a pattern that's already there within her so that she can recognize it, anchor it, recreate it, and refine it. I'm basically loosely quoting from things that are in this *HBR* article. We definitely encourage you to read that. We'll link to it. There's a good chart in the article as well with some language substitutions and some example situations of how to give feedback, not so much in the context of formal learning events or experiences—this is in a more informal context—but much of what's in that chart can be generalized to feedback you might give in a formal learning context. So, again, we'll link to that in the show notes. Something definitely useful to reference.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:39] This dovetails very nicely with Carol Dweck and her work in her book *Mindset* because she spends a good bit of time talking about feedback and how feedback can

foster or inhibit a growth mindset. What you were talking about there, Jeff, with what's happening at the neurological level, it definitely is also supported by Dweck and her work. Feedback that stresses and praises the learners' effort and process is much better in cultivating or encouraging that growth mindset versus feedback that judges learners' talent or intelligence. Praising effort and process, that puts people in a growth mindset. But, interestingly, or something that is very worthwhile keeping in mind, is that praising learners' intelligence—that's certainly positive feedback, saying, "Oh wow, you're so smart, Jeff"—but that can trigger the fixed mindset because that feedback is a label. I'm saying, "You're smart, Jeff" versus "Oh, that was a really smart way to think about approaching that problem." So even a positive label equates that person with their achievement or performance. To prompt the growth mindset in your feedback, you're going to always want to focus on effort or the way of thinking. So, again, "That was a smart way to think about that problem" is a very different than saying, "You're smart." We'll make sure to link in the show notes also back to that episode where we talked about mindset.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:09] Yes, Dweck's work definitely is very, very relevant here, and I certainly encourage listeners to go back and listen to that episode. As we're beginning to wrap up this episode, I'll note that, as with so much that we do as learning businesses, it's really important and meaningful to not only talk the talk but walk the walk, to be avatars for the kind of behavior we want and expect from our learners.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:37] While it's a different kind of feedback, asking for feedback from learners, asking them to complete post-course evaluations is a way of modeling the importance of feedback. And it shows we're open to feedback and, hopefully, that we're also open to making changes and improving based on that feedback.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:56] Of course, remember to ask for the specific types of feedback that are going to be most useful to you in those evaluations. I know that you're still going to get the stuff about the room being too cold, but, nonetheless. So that's it for our look at feedback.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:19] Now that you've listened—or re-listened—to this conversation about feedback, spend some time, on your own and with your team, reflecting on the questions we offered near the beginning. What feedback are you offering your learners? Is the feedback that you're offering consistent with what's known about how to promote learning?

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:37] Would your learning business benefit from revisiting and perhaps codifying the types of feedback you offer? At leadinglearning.com/episode389, you'll find those questions.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:48] You'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast, and we'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some feedback into the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:59] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Those ratings and reviews provide Celisa and me with some additional feedback, and they help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:17] Lastly, please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At leadinglearning.com/episode389, there are links to find us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:27] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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