The Power of Feedback
35 Principles for Turning Feedback from Others into Personal and Professional Change
By Joseph R. Folkman

The Big Idea
The process of review and feedback is common in most organizations. At one time or another, we will all likely receive feedback on our professional performance. However, unfortunately, most organizations and individuals do not know how to use the feedback they receive to improve their performance. As a result, nothing ever changes. The quality of feedback is not the problem – what we do with it is what counts.

For business leaders and their organizations, as well as professionals in any industry, listening to and acting on feedback is the best and most effective way to become more competent, capable, and effective. In The Power of Feedback, performance specialist Joseph Folkman presents thirty-five principles that help people and organizations turn feedback into real, effective, and long-term change. He shows you how to determine which feedback instruments will work for you and how to make the best use of their results.

When you put these principles to work in your professional life or in your organization, you will discover what a powerful and meaningful gift feedback can be. Whether you're a human resources leader who wants to get the most out of your performance review system, or a professional who needs practical help improving your performance, The Power of Feedback will show you the way.

Why You Need This Book
This book has the practical tools that you can use to maximize the value of feedback you receive. Together, they will put you on the right track for positive change, showing you how to understand the feedback you receive, accept it with the proper attitude, prioritize your efforts, and make the long-term changes that lead to real improvement.

PRINCIPLE 1
Asking others for input increases their expectation that you will change in a positive way.

Many who receive feedback turn that feedback into measurable change. However, others receiving feedback do not change. This frustrates not only those receiving the feedback, but also those providing the feedback.
**PRINCIPLE 2**

If you receive feedback but do not change for the better, you would be perceived in a more negative manner than if you had not received feedback.

You can compound your negative feedback by ignoring or rejecting it. When people receive feedback, they react. Their reactions may range from extremely negative to extremely positive, or there may be no visible reaction at all.

**PRINCIPLE 3**

You will not change what you do not believe needs to be changed.

Those who receive feedback and then make changes or adjustments in their behavior become better people because of the feedback. However, there may be a few obstacles along the way including denial.

**PRINCIPLE 4**

Rather than accept criticism, we tend to denounce not only what was said, but also those who said it.

The extent to which you have developed your denial skills determines the extent to which you accept feedback or question its accuracy.

**PRINCIPLE 5**

All perceptions are real, at least to those who own them.

Experience suggests that the most productive approach to handle feedback is to assume they are real.

**PRINCIPLE 6**

Balancing your normal but counterproductive reactions to feedback is essential in effectively dealing with feedback.

The following are four extremes or common coping strategies used in processing feedback that require balance:

- Rationalization versus literal acceptance
- Fight versus flight
- “That’s interesting” versus “that’s terrible”
- Paralysis of analysis versus ignorance is bliss

**PRINCIPLE 7**

The process of change begins with accepting the feedback given.

To improve your ability to accept feedback, it is helpful to first understand how others form impressions of you. Understanding this process should help you to balance your reactions to feedback.
PRINCIPLE 8

Others see us differently than we see ourselves.

Understanding how impression formation and attributions work also helps us make the process work for us instead of against us. The perceptions others have about us are real. People cannot be talked out of their impressions. Those impressions are created from what they observe and experience.

PRINCIPLE 9

To change the impression another person has of you, you must change your behavior.

Sometimes the impressions others have of us, though real to them, are not absolutely accurate. The focus is not on attacking them for their inaccuracy - since we can't talk them out of their impressions – but on working on ourselves. By understanding and working with the attribution process, we can create for others a more accurate perception.

PRINCIPLE 10

Once people form an impression, they are not as open to information that contradicts the original impression.

Our perceptions are also heavily influenced by position, status, roles, and responsibilities. We have expectations on how people ought to perform, and we tend to judge them based on those expectations, frequently ignoring the specifics of the situation.

PRINCIPLE 11

When we provide feedback, we tend to base our perceptions on our own performance and personality.

This should not come as a big surprise. Most of us are aware that our supervisors, peers, and direct reports tend to like the people who act and think the same way as they do.

PRINCIPLE 12

We tend to perceive the reasons for our own failure as having to do with the situation but, we see failure in others as having to do with their effort, ability, knowledge or character.

When people begin to understand the attribution process, they may begin to conclude that their feedback is not correct. They think that rather than being the “truth,” their feedback is riddled with attributions, packaged impressions, and halo effects. However, such conclusions are misleading.

PRINCIPLE 13

The feedback we receive reflects how others really feel about our performance and us.

The attribution process helps to explain how people arrive at their feelings and conclusions, but it doesn't explain them away. The attribution process is as follows:

- Once people form their first impressions of you, they strongly resist changing those impressions.
- People form general impressions about you and then rationalize your specific characteristics and behaviors to confirm those impressions.
- People do not give equal attention to all attributes. Some characteristics count more than others do. Understanding which characteristics are most critical is an essential element in bringing about change.
- Small changes in specific areas can have a significant impact on others' perceptions of you and create...
a halo effect.
- We tend to blame our own failure on factors in the environment, but we tend to blame the failures of others on the individual.
- Your associates do not want to believe that the source of your problems is the environment.

**PRINCIPLE 14**

One way of improving a skill is to improve your performance in companion skills.

The seven companion skills are:

- Integrity and honesty
- Shows consideration and concern for others
- Values differences
- Develops others
- Optimism
- Demonstrates willingness to set stretch goals
- Listens

**PRINCIPLE 15**

Change is only easy when you combine a high level of commitment with a low degree of difficulty.

When commitment and difficulty of a task is high, making a change is going to be difficult. Nevertheless, even when the difficulty of a task and commitment is low, making a change is still difficult. On the other hand, when commitment is low and the difficulty of a task is high, making a change is virtually impossible.

**PRINCIPLE 16**

Over time, people tend to maintain the same level of performance that they had when they first mastered their job.

The *law of performance homeostasis* predicts that most people would rather perform their jobs in a relaxed and comfortable state than in a stressed-out, exhausted state.

**PRINCIPLE 17**

To maintain a perception of high performance, you must change over time.

Since expectations increase over time, performing at the same levels and doing the same kind of work throughout your career, predictably results in lower performance evaluations from others as time goes on.

**PRINCIPLE 18**

“Average” managers are not good enough to make a significant impact on employee satisfaction and motivation.

People who would never be satisfied with average ratings on objective measures often consider average acceptable on subjective, perceptual measures such as feedback from others, since those measures seem to be more open to personal interpretation. But remember: Perceptions are reality.
PRINCIPLE 19

Everything you do makes a difference.

As you consider the feedback you receive, you might tell yourself that a particular issue is not significant, or that it doesn’t count. But it does count. It may not count much looking at the weakness in light of all your strengths and may seem totally insignificant but, it definitely counts. Highly effective people believe like this - average people do not.

PRINCIPLE 20

Involving others in your efforts to change increases the likelihood that change will occur.

One of the best ways to learn new skills and better ways to interact with others is from a coach or mentor – someone we can observe, has the right skills, and will observe and provide us with feedback, encouragement, and suggestions for change.

PRINCIPLE 21

The most critical skill in making change based on feedback is deciding what specific issues to work on first.

Issues that are the most negative or most complained about are the noticeable ones. Evaluating what issues to change ought to undergo a completely separate decision-making process that is independent of how negatively people react to issues.

PRINCIPLE 22

Issues dealing with things are easier to change than issues dealing with people.

Another thing to consider in rating the difficulty of change is whether the matter deals with people or things. Changing things is easier than changing people for two reasons:

First, we have much more control over things. Things do not resist or reject change, as most people often do.

And, second, we are more skillful at working with things than with people.

PRINCIPLE 23

Most people believe that, to improve, they have to eliminate their weaknesses rather than build on their strengths.

The key to improving individual effectiveness is developing a few profound strengths.

PRINCIPLE 24

Doing something well has a dramatic impact on perceived effectiveness.

How do you build strength? Most people assume the way to build strength is simply to do something faster, more frequently, or with greater endurance. However, when people attempt to build strength, they end up doing nothing because they cannot figure out how to improve any further.
PRINCIPLE 25

A critical step in personal change is to change the strategies, structures, and systems that support or reinforce the behavior you desire to change.

To understand the organizational implications of your feedback, ask yourself these five questions:

- How is this behavior rewarded by others in the organization?
- Who encourages or discourages this behavior and why?
- If I do this unwanted behavior, what good things could happen? What bad things could happen?
- Is there something in the way this organization is designed and structured that reinforces this behavior?
- Is there something within the systems of the organization that reinforces this behavior?

PRINCIPLE 26

Close observation of others who have demonstrated skills will help you develop the same skills.

Observing how others interact, react, present, think, and decide is extremely valuable. Developing good observation skills is essential for learning. Anyone can learn from the obvious, but few people are careful enough to watch and learn the subtle skills needed to move up in the organization.

PRINCIPLE 27

Redefining negative feedback in a positive light creates increased motivation to change.

When failure makes us feel powerless and like a victim, change does not occur. It is recommended that you reinterpret your story by casting your feedback in a more positive light - one in which you have more control.

PRINCIPLE 28

Those things we persist on doing eventually change our feelings and appetites.

Changing our habits is often like changing what we eat. At first, we do not like it, or it doesn’t feel natural. However, those things we insist on doing eventually change our feelings and appetites. What was not satisfying and fulfilling in the past, can become satisfying and fulfilling in the future, if we persist.

PRINCIPLE 29

Changing behavior often requires changing core beliefs.

As you consider changing some of your behaviors, ask yourself: “What beliefs, values, or rules do I have that support and reinforce the behavior I am attempting to change?” Sometimes, to change your behavior, you have to change your beliefs.

PRINCIPLE 30

Rewarding successive approximations of a desired new behavior increases the likelihood of acquiring the new behavior.

As you become more comfortable, increase the steps and try something harder. Lay out a plan of successive steps that will help you accomplish your goals. Then, during the shaping process, do not forget your ultimate goal of performing a desired behavior.
PRINCIPLE 31

For many changes, you can increase the likelihood of positive change by persuading others to change with you.

The key is not to get others to change, but first to become personally committed to the change, and then ask others for help in changing with you.

PRINCIPLE 32

Changes that last are those that feel natural and consistent with our core character and personal style.

Think back to your youth, to a time when you were most authentic – that was your genuine style. Think back to a time when you felt good, honest, and true – that was your true character. If you build on these attributes, you will never go wrong.

PRINCIPLE 33

Lasting changes often require implementing new systems or structures.

Although not all of the changes we have to make in life can be solved with structure, as humans we tend to consider making personal changes before making structural changes.

PRINCIPLE 34

Increasing your knowledge and skill base, especially in new technologies, will make your efforts to change more effective and increase your self-confidence.

Often, the knowledge and experience you acquire on one software program or piece of equipment is transferable to another. Your first software program will likely be the hardest to learn. Then, other programs will usually be easier because they use similar procedures. With technology, the learning process often continues for a long time.

PRINCIPLE 35

You can only make significant like changes if you have the necessary desire, strength, and motivation to cause those changes to happen.

Change requires energy, strength, and motivation. Often, people want to change, but they lack the strength to make it happen. When people lack the strength or motivation, the following often can help: removing large distractions, increasing mental strength, getting in shape, maintaining a crystal clear vision of the desired result, describing models for success and failure, focusing on the benefits of change, and planning for success.