Great, As Always

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A compliment that could have been given to anyone — and why so few organisations get past it.

“You were great as always, as expected.”

That was it. That was my feedback.

I was running a five-day programme for older teenagers back in the UK. The person overseeing me was my lead colleague on the project. We had history. We’d worked closely together and we got on well.

At the end of the week we sat down for the debrief. We went through my observations of the programme — the standard sequence. What went well. What could be improved. What might become an issue next time. Thorough, honest, useful.

Then it was my turn to receive. And that one line was all I got.

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Positive Is Not the Same as Useful

The tone was warm. The words were kind. And it did not make me feel good.

It made me feel taken for granted. Unappreciated, even. And it gave me nothing I could take forward.

I was still fairly young in the industry. I was actively trying to tweak, change and improve what I did. So I needed to know where to look. Which parts were working and should be left alone? Which parts needed refining? Which should I stop doing altogether?

I couldn’t see that for myself. Nobody can. That’s the whole point of feedback. I needed an external perspective — an objective pair of eyes and a more experienced voice. I wanted something genuine. Something thought out and considered. Something that actually applied to me.

What I got was a compliment that could have been given to anyone.

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Twenty Years On

That was over twenty years ago.

At the end of September, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that younger workers are asking for exactly what I wanted that day: regular, concrete direction rather than a once-a-year review. Some organisations are responding with quarterly check-ins framed as two-way conversations. And several of the young workers interviewed said they don't need heavy praise. They want clarity — tell me what's wrong and how to fix it.

None of this is new. People have been asking for it for decades.

So why haven't we moved forward?

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The System That Lasted One Cycle

I once tried to build it.

At an organisation I worked for, I introduced a 360 feedback system. Input from your peers, the people you supervise, your superiors — everyone whose circle of influence touched yours. You gave feedback on them. They gave feedback on you.

We worked in cycles of roughly three to four months, so regular feedback fitted naturally into the rhythm of the year.

I knew nobody wants more paperwork, so I streamlined the process as far as I could. Hard copy or digital, your choice. The forms were available from the end of the previous cycle, so people could jot things down as they went rather than trying to remember everything at the end. I kept it short, because some people would have several reports to write.

It lasted one cycle. About three and a half months.

Then the owner of the company said: "I can't be bothered. It's too much work."

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What Happened Next

The effect was almost immediate.

The level of staff feedback dropped dramatically. We'd seen the same thing before, when the number of feedback and mentoring sessions managers were required to run was cut. People did the bare minimum. Some did less.

And something else shifted. People lost respect for a lot of managers and directors.

The few who carried on giving feedback anyway earned real respect. The ones who didn't came across as not caring — about their staff, about the company or about the industry they were in.

> *Dropping feedback doesn't just remove a process. It sends a message about who matters.*

That's the part that rarely gets counted.

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We Talk the Talk

Here's the irony that bothers me most.

That programme debrief I described at the start — what went well, what could be better, what might go wrong — is standard practice in our sector. We are good at reviewing programmes. We expect our staff to review sessions, debrief participants and reflect on every activity.

But we don't do it for our own people.

We talk the talk. We don't walk the walk. What we expect staff to do on programmes, we don't do for our staff. To me, that's hypocrisy. Why would an organisation expect its people to do something it won't do for them?

And if senior staff don't role model it, why would anyone else put effort into it?

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Why Don't We Do It?

The usual stumbling blocks are time, money and effort.

And it is work. I won't pretend otherwise. But it's also an investment — and I know I say this a lot. You invest time, effort and occasionally a little money in your staff. The dividends are huge: better performance, better customer satisfaction, more loyalty, better retention.

After thirty years of working, I still struggle with how this isn't more widely accepted.

Some organisations do it well. Some schools. Some social media companies. Some healthcare providers. Usually informally, but it does happen. Yet in many of the more traditionally professional fields, regular, useful, actionable feedback still seems to be a struggle.

So the fundamental question has to be: do people simply not believe in the value of it?

I want to be careful here, because this can easily slide into a lazy generational jibe. It isn't about age. But there is an old-fashioned mentality at work, and I wish it weren't so prevalent. *My time is more important. The company's money is more important.* Almost anything ends up more important than investing in staff, because the return isn't immediate and it isn't always obvious.

Underneath that, I think, sits something more human. People forget the help they had. All the people who contributed to getting them where they are. They look back through rose-tinted glasses and conclude: *I built this with my own two hands. I never asked anyone for help.* I heard versions of it growing up — "you've got all the tools available", "do it yourself".

Isaac Newton knew better: "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

Nobody is self-made. Feedback is one of the ways we lift each other onto those shoulders.

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The Return Is Real — Just Slow

Two stories.

Not long ago I received a message from someone I hadn't worked with for over ten years. They opened by apologising for their attitude back then. They admitted they'd resented working for me and for the organisation, and that they'd resisted a lot of what we asked of them. But looking back — and even, they said, at the time — it was some of the best feedback they'd ever had. It helped them grow as a person.

I also remember a current colleague telling some staff that there were times he hated me. That I made his life difficult. And that it was the most developmental experience he'd had in any organisation.

Neither of those showed up on a spreadsheet at the end of the quarter. That's exactly the problem. The return on feedback is real, but it's slow and it's quiet. If you only measure what's immediate, you'll always conclude it's too much work.

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What It Looks Like Now

In my own work, we try to keep everything as open as we can.

I build time into the schedule before we start working with young people — time to talk to staff and run through the day with them. More often than not, it turns into an informal training or coaching session.

I encourage people — to the point of almost demanding it — to ask questions. *Why do you do it that way?* I want discourse. I don't want anyone accepting something blindly just because Mike does it. Let's go through the process together.

At the end of the day, I give feedback. I encourage people to give feedback to each other, and to me. If someone wants to do something differently, give me a reason why — and we'll do it differently. Brilliant. That's how everything improves. That's how we evolve, as individuals and as a company.

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Practical Takeaways

1. **Be specific or don't bother.** "Great as always" tells someone nothing. Name the actual thing they did and why it worked.
2. **Make it regular, not annual.** Feedback lands best close to the work. Build it into the rhythm you already have — end of day, end of programme or end of cycle.
3. **Don't skip the middle ground.** Most feedback is "keep doing this" or "stop doing that". The most useful conversations are about what was *almost* brilliant and how to refine it.
4. **Make it two-way.** Invite questions and challenge, and give your own reasons. If a better way emerges, adopt it.

5. **Lead from the top.** If senior staff don't give and receive feedback, nobody else will take it seriously.
6. **Treat it as an investment.** Judge it on loyalty, growth and retention over years, not on how much time it took this week.
7. **Debrief your people the way you debrief your programmes.** The discipline already exists. Point it inwards.

> *Next time you're tempted to say "great, as always", stop and ask yourself what, specifically, was great — and what could be even better. Then say that instead.*

Being expected to be good is not the same as being helped to get better.

Want to build a feedback culture that lasts longer than one cycle? Helping organisations grow their people is part of what we do.

ORGANISATIONAL GROWTH

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