



Feedback: Fueling Leadership Development for Human Flourishing and Honor

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Abstract

Professional coaching is well suited to address, display, and yield human flourishing. Since introducing the Golden Trifecta of Leadership Development in 2022 (Wiater, 2022), advancing the understanding and application of the model has been paramount. Feedback is essential for leader growth in all three relationships of the model. Feedback done right and well can not only lead to flourishing but is a demonstration of partnerships of honor. Applying feedback is what gives it power. Trust and psychological safety are core to creating relationships of honor. High-impact leaders tend to receive less and lower-quality feedback. When the leader is honored, they can flourish, and when the leader flourishes, there is a pathway for followers and the organization to flourish as well.

Keywords: feedback, leader, flourish, honor, partnership, Christian, coach

Introduction

The 2024 Professional Coaching Call for Abstracts was a challenge for Christian practitioners to present best practices from their experiences in a faith context and connect them to coaching and human flourishing. The theme of the Professional Coaching Roundtables is *Partnerships of Honor* under the School of Business and Leadership (SBL) theme of *Human Flourishing – Its Role in Business and Leadership*. The call noted professional coaching is well suited to address, display, and yield human flourishing.

Since introducing the Golden Trifecta of Leadership Development in 2022 (Wiater, 2022), advancing the understanding and application of the model has been paramount. The premise of this model is that for true leadership development to take place, the three elements of training, mentoring, and coaching have to be in place and operating in

the context of the leader's experience. Practically, in my roles as a coach trainer, coach, and professor, it has become clear the context of experience has little or no power for the individual in growth and development without the relational aspect of feedback. Feedback is essential for leader growth in all three relationships of the model. The essentiality of feedback led to calling it the fuel for the Golden Trifecta of Leadership Development. Without feedback, growth is non-existent or stunted. Feedback when given in and through honoring partnerships leads to flourishing leaders.

Baylor University's Global Flourishing Study (GFS) (n.d.) was, in part, an inspiration for the theme of the SBL 2024 Annual Research Roundtables. "The Global Flourishing Study is grounded in a broadly inclusive understanding of what it means to flourish: *living in a state in which all aspects of a person's life are good*" (Flourishing Defined section). The study defines flourishing and is measuring six domains broadly shared across 20 countries and cultures. This 5-year, groundbreaking study has more than 200,000 participants and 40 researchers. While this study contributes to the research prompt, I will present an extended understanding of flourishing.

What does this mean to those of us who are leadership development practitioners? Broadly, I am addressing all leadership development practitioners, specifically those who are Christ followers, and still more focused, those who are Christian coaches.

While the Golden Trifecta of Leadership Development includes training, mentoring, and coaching, this article specifically puts attention on the coach-client partnership. This article presents feedback as fuel for leadership development. Beyond that, it presents the power of partnerships of honor in providing a safe place for leaders to position themselves to receive feedback. Demonstrating further, feedback done right and well can not only lead to flourishing but is also a demonstration of partnerships of honor.

Definition of Coaching

As with academic definitions, nailing down an agreed-upon definition of "coaching" is difficult. Those who receive coaching attest it works! Coaching done well has impact. In the 2022 SBL Regent University Annual Research Roundtables, I presented the definition of coaching as "an agreed-upon client-centered and client-driven partnering relationship, skill set and process honoring the client which leads to transformation for the clients" (Wiater, 2022). It is a bit clunky as I read it now. In this definition, "partnership," "client-centered," "client-driven," "agreed upon," and "honoring" were keywords and concepts I deemed necessary for inclusion. The definition is evolving as my research and understanding of coaching advances. As a side note and in anticipation, I expect, following the 2024 Roundtables, I will continue to draw from and collaborate with Christian coach colleagues in developing a new or revised definition.

Feedback is essential in leadership development. It is not surprising that as we read about valuable feedback, we see the construct of trust. Trust is necessary for feedback to be credible and received.

Trust and Safety

Trust and psychological safety are core to creating relationships of honor. Trust positively contributes to leadership development (Al Shamsi et al.). European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) Sr. level practitioner team coach Dr. Kelly Whelan (2022) notes that “trust is the expectation that an individual can be counted on to do what they say they will do in a future moment. Trust happens in personal and professional relationships and is given to an individual but is also diminished or lost” (p. 7). Whelan continues, “when people experience psychological safety, they feel safe, valued, welcomed, encouraged, appreciated, and acknowledged ... share openly thoughts, feelings, ideas without the fear of retaliation” (p. 8). In guiding individuals into creating a Kingdom Culture of Honor, Dr. Dana Cavallaro (2015), instructor at Regent University’s School of Divinity writes,

When people feel honored and safe, they no longer have to wear a mask to cover their shame. They can be transparent, honest about their flaws, and authentic. In this culture of honor, healthy shame serves as a reminder of sin, not to condemn, but to emphasize the wonder of grace and inclusion into God’s family. (p. 270)

Cavallaro (2015) and Whelan (2022) mark true honor as taking place through one’s relationship with God first. In a chapter on coaching, leadership, and follower development, I (Wiater, 2023) note, “Trust is so centric to coaching that in my conversations with peers, many professional coaches think you cannot have a coaching relationship without it. Trust begets trust and strengthens the coaching relationship” (p. 114). As Christian coaches and leaders, our first responsibility in creating trust, psychological safety, cultures of honor, and partnerships of honor is our identity in Christ and being vessels of honor humbled and obedient to our Lord.

Feedback and Reference Points

In my 2024 Professional Coaching Roundtables presentation (Wiater, 2024), I note that indicator lights are valuable features on everyday equipment, giving us quick visual status as points of reference. They function to comfort, warn, or notify us and, in some way, build awareness. I ask, “What if we had indicator lights or instruments for our leadership development status?” My response is a proclamation. We do! Those indicators are feedback. To press this point further, without implementation and accountability, the feedback is void and can spoil.

In my leader development, I recall a supervisor guiding me through receiving feedback I was resistant to. He asked me what I was going to do with that feedback, I did not know. He instructed me to pause and ask myself if it was true. It was. I did not say so out loud. I did not like that it was true and did not like that someone had given me the feedback. His next question to me was, "What are you going to do with it?" Notice, he did not ask if it was true or if it was not true. The question was powerful. As was his practice, he seized the teachable moment and expertly instructed me.

Key points:

- Feedback can reduce anxiety and increase the likelihood an employee will meet and exceed performance targets. (Groover, 2006)
- Feedback can establish expectations and standards of performance (Groover, 2006)
- Subordinates are developed through feedback (Al Shamsi et al., (2015)
- The feedback process has a positive impact on employee satisfaction
- Feedback is a method of correcting course (Roberts, 2024)
- Feedback positively impacts predictability (Al Shamsi et al., (2015)
- Feedback impacts leader perceptions (Maxwell, 2005)
- Feedback can change and impact outcomes (Maxwell, 2005)

Two global EMCC leadership coaches, Samantha Amit and Dr. Kelly Whelan, collaborated on a podcast to share techniques for leaders giving and receiving feedback. Their conversation dove into intentionality, mindset, and psychological safety. Creating a safe space for feedback goes beyond the old sandwich model where the negative or difficult-to-hear information is sandwiched between two positive pieces of information to make it more palatable for the receiver. Amit (2024), while guiding leaders in the audience, stated,

The environment that you're going to create, and that's not just from a psychological safety environment, but the actual physical environment that you're going to be in ... we typically don't want to have these conversations, especially if they are uncomfortable at the water cooler in the hallway with everybody standing around, so setting the stage is important when we are talking about feedback. (24:38)

During the podcast (Amit, 2024), Amit encouraged listeners by noting, you cannot just leave someone with feedback, they might need nurturing. Below is a summary of Amit and Whelan's key points.

- We need to recognize that feedback may not be delivered perfectly
- Give yourself and the other person grace

- Sit with the uncomfortable information; you do not have to do something immediately
- Remember that it is not about you as a person
- Feedback is one of the best ways to develop yourself and your team
- Stretch yourself past your comfort

There is limited guidance regarding how the leader ought to position themselves to receive feedback. In an article by Sutherland et al. (2024), we learn highly effective leaders often receive less valuable developmental feedback from supervisors, peers, or direct reports. The feedback they do receive tends to focus more on fostering self-awareness and self-improvement rather than being performance-driven. High-impact leaders typically get less and lower-quality feedback compared to their moderate or low-impact counterparts (Sutherland et al., 2024). We learned that rater training is crucial for meaningful assessments, as untrained feedback may lack value. Additionally, multi-rater assessments have limitations, making proper rater preparation essential (Sutherland et al., 2024).

Some of the above points are common for those who manage or work with people. Not common is the practical knowledge for leader development that we need to apply and use as the fuel of feedback. Applying feedback ignites and gives it power. Leadership coaches partner with leaders in applying feedback.

Developing relationships and positioning ourselves to give and receive feedback is catalytic to leadership development. Trust and credibility create safety for leaders to give, receive, and apply feedback. Applied feedback is catalytic to growth in our leader development.

Is the leader's position for receiving feedback different than any other? No. For the Christian leader, the position is the same. The Apostle Paul reminds us,

For by the grace given me, I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/2011, Rom. 12:3)

Building relationships and positioning ourselves to both give and receive feedback are essential catalysts for leadership development. When effectively applied, feedback becomes a powerful driver of growth in our leadership journey.

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Flourishing

The 2024 Professional Coaching Call for Abstracts, noted that of all professions, coaching is the one helping people flourish. In coaching language, we use phrases and terms like “helping clients become their best selves” “becoming their best self” “reaching their potential,” “attaining dreams,” and “living fully.” We are still trying to express clear definitions of Christian coaching, and many professionals have poured time, thinking power, prayer, and conversations into expressing what coaching is and does. In the profession, there has been an awakening regarding what coaching can do for the client.

The term, “potential,” presents the assumption of an expected end for someone, the impression of potential as something to be attained. This suggests a finite, predetermined, explainable outcome. Can we, as Christian coaches know what reaching potential really is for someone? In coaching the focus is on the client’s outcomes, goals, and desires, which guide the coach-client partnership. The coach brings their heart to the client and professional competencies to support the client. In a study by Steffens et al. (2018), leaders who were told they had low potential to become leaders lost interest and were less committed to their development as leaders.

Flourishing immediately evokes images of overflowing abundance, uncontainable beauty, lush, healthy, thriving, foliage and fruit. Boundlessness! Webster (1828), paraphrased, expressed the words “flourish” and “flourishing” as a sense of hope, openness, expanding, thriving, to grow luxuriantly, prosperous, and increase wealth. What if we, as Christian coaches, are partners with God (the Holy Spirit) in helping our clients flourish? Many Christian coaches have the expectation and practice of partnering with God to help the client become their best self. In a recent article for Christian coach practitioners, Perera (2024) notes, “Christian coaching-client partnerships founded and rooted in the Trinity will produce lasting results” (“What Christian coaching circles” section).

I will take this further and say, when I see something flourishing, I see beauty, I am filled with joy and hope. Consider the impact Christian coaching could have on human flourishing. The Apostle Paul, in his prayer for the Ephesian church, declares this,

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, ²¹ to Him *be* the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations ^[n]forever and ever. Amen. (*New American Standard Bible*, 1960/1995, Eph. 3:20–21)

When this prayer is fulfilled, we have no idea what an individual flourishing is becoming!

In another prayer of the Apostle Paul, he says,

I thank my God, every time I remember you, in all my prayers for you I pray with joy, for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who began the good work in you will carry it to completion, until the day of Christ our Lord. (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/2011, Phil. 1:3-6)

The word translated as “completion” is in the continual present and means it is always happening. It did not get completed. It is completing.

The Holy Spirit convicts, comforts, guides and leads us. The Holy Spirit exists to bring glory to God. When believers cooperate with the Holy Spirit and allow the gifts of the Spirit to flow through them, they live compelling lives. Flourishing is out of bounds, overflowing lush, rich beauty!

Leader Position in Receiving Feedback

Let’s circle back to an early question in the article, What is the position the leader should have when receiving feedback? Leader or follower, the position for receiving feedback is the same and is characterized by humility. Leaders should ask for feedback.

Partnership of Honor

Christian leaders have both the responsibility and privilege of co-creating a safe space—psychologically and physically—for offering and receiving feedback. By fostering a partnership rooted in honor, leaders bring their authentic selves to the relationship. Each partner is accountable for demonstrating the character of Christ, avoiding condemnation, and recognizing and honoring one another’s identity as uniquely created in the image of God. Partners serve as humble vessels before the Lord. Trust, humility, and the shared identity in Christ, along with mutual recognition of this identity, are hallmarks of partnerships built on honor. When the leader is honored, they can flourish, and when the leader flourishes, there is a pathway for followers and the organization to flourish, as well.

About the Author

Dr. Diane Wiater serves as the chair of the 2024 SBL Professional Coaching Roundtable. With more than 25 years of experience in training and teaching coaches, she is a coach’s coach and leader in developing Christian coaches. Dr. Wiater is a certified Gallup® Strengths Coach and is certified to administer the MBTI. As founder and CEO of Wiater Consulting Group, LLC, Dr. Wiater is a trusted strategic partner, profitable business manager, and effective leader developer. Her passion is seeing leaders grow, thrive,

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