

joyous

Creating trust and transparency with open feedback





The end of suggestion box thinking

Once upon a time organizations put out suggestion boxes for employee feedback. The theory was that people would feel safe putting their ideas in the box because nobody would know whose idea it was. There would be no repercussions or awkward questions, only a free flow of feedback leading to better working conditions.

The truth is most suggestion boxes stayed mostly empty for most of the time. Feedback entered the black hole of the box and nothing came of it, so eventually people just stopped bothering (barring the occasional overtime rant or request for M&Ms in the break room.)

Today's anonymous feedback is not so far removed from that suggestion box. People submit feedback without their name on it, and without any assurances that anything will change as a result of what they say. Nobody sees what goes into the box, so nobody's directly accountable for doing anything with it. Nothing much changes, so people don't bother putting too much effort into their feedback. Which means the information that is collected is of limited usefulness, and so nothing much changes...

The good news is we're not limited to simply automating the suggestion box. There is a better way to do employee feedback; a way that brings people together and helps them to have authentic conversations about work.

Are you ready for open feedback?

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Anonymous Confidential Open



Anonymous feedback

There's no way to identify who said what. All personally identifying information is absent from responses. In truly anonymous studies, none of this information is even collected in the first place - no email address, no ID number, no IP address.



Confidential feedback

Identifiable information is collected, but isn't disclosed or attached to the response. Some organizations will make all feedback confidential, meaning they have the ability to trace feedback to the source but don't make that information public.



Open feedback

What it says on the tin. Names are attached to feedback and everybody who needs to see it can. They are then free to respond to or to act on the feedback as appropriate.

Anonymity is the enemy of action

Unless someone volunteers their information, a piece of anonymous feedback remains just that - one piece of disconnected, context-less, un-actionable feedback.

It's possible for feedback to be kept confidential but not truly anonymous, and in cases where people fear some kind of retribution, this is generally a wise idea. Keeping sensitive information confidential protects the individual while still allowing you to act quickly - you know whose feedback it is and you can approach them for more information or to discuss options.

Anonymous feedback shouldn't be the default, but that doesn't mean you can't provide channels and support for feedback that has to be kept confidential for privacy or legal reasons. Just be aware that this type of feedback will usually require even more immediate action, and be prepared to follow up appropriately.

For everything else, open feedback should be the gold standard. Taking micro- and macro-level action is easier, data can be made increasingly granular, and analytics are more informative when you know where feedback is coming from.

Feedback without action is meaningless; you need to **do something** with the information you collect. If people never see anything change as a result of speaking up, they're going to be less engaged, and less likely to contribute again.

When you tell people that anonymous feedback is the only safe feedback, you reinforce the idea that providing feedback - any feedback - is unsafe.



Using anonymous feedback

In the absence of specific information you're limited to acting on the macro scale. If enough people want better technology, you either upgrade technology, or you don't. If people are unhappy about the support they're getting, you either train managers or you don't. You might be able to narrow feedback down to departments or locations, but taking micro-actions - doing things at the individual level - isn't possible with anonymous feedback. The problem with this is **very few people will make the direct connection between their specific feedback and the macro-actions taking place at the company level.**

And the Catch-22 of anonymous feedback is that even if you deduce who the feedback's come from, you still can't approach them about it. Because if you sit someone down to talk about their anonymous feedback you're going to undermine the integrity of the system. Something people are supposed to trust *literally because it hides their identity* will now be regarded with deep suspicion.

Some feedback software allows you to reach out to the respondent anonymously, but at some point - to get further clarification, help them out or recognize them for their input - you will need to know who they are. For leaders to build trust in the feedback process they must be able to demonstrate they're using feedback to make work better. Anonymity interferes with their ability to take the kind of micro actions that show individuals that someone's listening - and paying attention - to what they say.

When it comes to feedback, anonymity is less effective, and frankly, out of style in today's workplace. We expect our leaders to be candid and transparent, particularly about the important stuff. We expect them to tell us the whole story and to openly share their failures and missteps. Yet, when it comes to asking employees for feedback about something as important as their work experience, we use completely different standards. Why? We've convinced ourselves that employees just aren't up to the task.

Jason Lauritsen

Five things people get wrong about open feedback

1

People will only give honest feedback if they can do it anonymously.

Perhaps true for some, but even honest anonymous feedback isn't that useful. You might be surprised how forthcoming people are once they feel comfortable with - and trust - open feedback.

2

People will score rated questions higher if their name goes with it because they don't want to be perceived negatively.

Some people will do this. But you should be more focused on getting high quality feedback than on getting high scores: you can't do much with a score, but you can make a world of difference by acting on feedback. Consider asking unrated questions if this is a major concern in your workplace.

3

People simply won't provide any feedback at all.

We've got mountains of data from large enterprises across many industries that prove this is simply not true. We've collected hundreds of thousands of *attributed* comments from people at all levels of all kinds of organizations.

4

Leaders aren't equipped to handle the feedback they will receive from their team.

Your leaders are talking to their teams all the time; in person, on MS Teams or Slack or email. This is no different. In fact, you can make it even easier to talk about work by asking questions about people's experiences, not leader behaviors.

5

Our organization doesn't have an open culture. They're just not ready for this.

It's critical for engagement that people know that their voice matters and that the organization cares what they have to say. Show them that they can trust feedback by creating a psychologically safe space for people to be open and honest. And by doing something with the feedback you get!





Removing the stress from feedback

When our brain senses a threat, our body activates a threat response. It'll go into some form of defensive behavior and lock down most functions that aren't necessary for survival. It's what we rely on to keep us alive when we're confronted by an angry bear.

And, as it turns out, when we have to deal with feedback.

To illustrate how feedback constitutes a threat, we can take a look at the [SCARF framework](#) from David Rock. It lays out a range of things that can trigger a social threat and create stress:

Status: talking to a person of higher status (eg a manager)

Certainty: being unsure what feedback we're going to receive, or how the meeting will go

Autonomy: not being in control of the feedback - we didn't ask for it, we didn't choose the meeting time, we didn't set the agenda, we're not leading the conversation

Relatedness: being outside our social comfort zone - talking to someone we don't know very well or can't relate to

Fairness: perceiving that the feedback, or the feedback process, isn't fair

Feedback may not present the same threat level as a rampaging bear, but that's academic. Biologically it doesn't matter if the threat is real or not - all that matters is that we *feel* it.

So what happens then? We go on the defensive. We shut down or retreat and we're definitely not going to take the time to positively reflect on the feedback we're about to receive.

Stress is prohibitive. When we feel stressed we think less, find it difficult to draw connections in information, and experience fewer 'aha' moments. Essentially, stress prevents us from thinking clearly and learning effectively. So for feedback to be an active learning opportunity (and isn't that the entire point of feedback?) it *can't* be stressful.

Making conversations the new normal

When talking about work is something that happens all the time, between all kinds of people and for all kinds of reasons, then it becomes normalized. If your manager comes up and says "we need to talk about your work", then there's no reason to panic.

Creating an open and transparent work culture is critical to reducing feedback-related stress. Other ways to reduce the feedback threat include:

Status: recognizing and appreciating people for their work, especially publicly (if they're into that - it pays to ask people for their preference).

Certainty: eliminating surprises is key - communicating what the feedback process is and what the outcomes will be.

Autonomy: encouraging people to seek and give feedback under their own steam; to dictate who they talk to, about what. Invite them to offer their own ideas and make their own decisions about work.

Relatedness: it's easier talking to people we know, and we tend to be more honest the closer we are to someone. Encouraging connections is helpful - even getting together for lunch can make people feel more comfortable with each other. And leaders certainly shouldn't be waiting for formal feedback or review sessions to talk to their people. Communication should be ongoing.

Fairness: making work conversations open, honest and authentic. Transparent communication leaves no room for assumptions of (un)fairness. No more receiving soul-destroying negative feedback from an unnamed source and being unable to follow it up.

90%

are more likely to stay at a company that takes and acts on feedback
Achievers

Employees who feel their voice is heard at work are nearly

five times

more likely to feel empowered to perform their best work
Salesforce

90%

of employees who received recognition or thanks from their boss indicated higher levels of trust vs 48% who received no recognition
Michael Page

97%

of Gen Z is receptive to receiving feedback on an ongoing basis
EY

80%

of Gen Y prefer on-the-spot recognition over formal reviews
Achievers



Conversations are key to building a trust culture

When feedback is anonymous and there are no names attached, you don't know how or where to start doing anything about it. It's just a piece of feedback, disconnected from any useful context.

Organizational psychologist Roger Schwarz says the inability to act is characteristic of feedback. Or rather, characteristic of a unit of feedback; one feedback statement isn't going to give you a lot of scope for action.

What you're looking for is the conversation that follows that feedback. That's where you get the context and the detail to understand and do something about the situation. By making feedback open you give people the opportunity to clarify or elaborate on their feedback.

It's obvious where you go from there!

Context is critical

Anonymity messes with our reasoning. When we receive negative feedback with no name attached we're likely to assume it comes from someone with an agenda. Someone who doesn't have our best interests at heart, or who doesn't really know us. We give less weight to this feedback because it challenges our perception of self. It could come from someone who knows us well and who's taking this opportunity to help us learn and grow professionally, but without that knowledge we're going to assume otherwise.

Conversely, we tend to give positive anonymous feedback more credence: it must be from someone who matters, who knows us well, because obviously we **are** this awesome. Anonymity strips away the cues we use to process feedback rationally, again removing a lot of its usefulness.

Make it safe to talk about work

It's important for people to be able to have constructive conversations. It's a life skill. It helps us negotiate and build relationships and can even strengthen bonds in teams. But it's not easy. It can be uncomfortable, awkward or even intimidating to talk about some things that happen at work, so most of us need a bit of practice to be able to do it without triggering a threat response.

All of this important social learning is lost when feedback is anonymous. Tim can't see that Mary thinks he's amazing and would like to join the infrastructure team to learn from him. Zack can't see that Sam's feeling shut out of the customer negotiations and would like more opportunity to contribute. These people can't get together to discuss these things and build a better working relationship, because anonymity.

For people to feel safe talking about work, leaders need to model the behavior. They need to be the first to step up and say what they think, and how they feel. They need to normalize speaking up to seek help, offer ideas or express vulnerability. And it needs to be very clear that what happens next is an honest and constructive conversation, not chastisement (or nothing at all!)

For most working people, their direct manager is the person who has the biggest impact on day-to-day work experiences. These leaders - more than any others - need to engage their reports regularly in feedback conversations. Not to criticize or go over past mistakes, but to enable better performance and build stronger working relationships for the future. This builds trust and makes it feel natural to talk honestly about work.



Psychological safety

Psychological safety is what enables us to speak up, and to take calculated risks without the fear of reprimand. In a trusting culture it's acknowledged that mistakes and disagreements will happen, and that they're opportunities to learn and improve - not a convenient excuse to punish the people involved. So people are comfortable speaking up because they trust that they won't face repercussions. A lot of the stress is removed from the equation, and feedback is less of a threat.

Anonymous feedback may give people somewhere to hide, but when we feel psychologically safe we don't need that protection. We're fine with speaking out, and we're totally cool with having our name on our feedback. We know we'll be able to deal with whatever follows in a rational and constructive way.

There's no shortcut to building a psychologically safe, trusting culture. Especially when so many people have been burned after speaking out before. But here are a few ways to start.

- Create a shared understanding of the nature and importance of your work. Explain why it's important to speak up - who's depending on you? What happens if you don't talk about your experiences?
- Invite input and ideas. Ask people how they see their work situations and what they would do to make them better, or safer.
- Show appreciation when people come forward, and respond appropriately. Help solve problems rather than reprimanding people for causing them. Then debrief as a team to make sure everyone's on the same page for next time.
- Model the behavior you want to see. Talk about work openly and honestly, and encourage authentic conversations.
- Do something with the feedback you receive. You don't want people to become jaded with the whole feedback process. So take action - or when you can't, explain your reasoning.

"If you're trying to build an open, positive, thriving culture, why would you do it secretly?"

Ceri Rowland - GGM People & Culture Douglas Pharmaceuticals



The anatomy of anonymity

People who like the idea of anonymous employee feedback surveys say it's because anonymity frees people to speak their minds. Because nobody knows who's speaking, everyone can be honest and candid and say all the things they're too scared to say to someone's face. But what happens when anonymous isn't truly anonymous?

If you've ever been called into your manager's office to discuss something you said in your anonymous survey, here's what to look out for next time.

If you have to log in to the company intranet, training or performance tool fill in a form you can probably assume your responses could be traced to you. They might not be! But they could...

With online forms look for your name, employee ID, survey ID or any other identifier after the ? in the URL.

To be clear: there's no massive worldwide conspiracy of not-quite-anonymous survey designers. Professional survey companies are going to do what they can to ensure respondent anonymity, so you can rest easy if your anonymous survey comes from one of these guys.

FEEDBACK FORM
With any of these features

Unique identifier code: 1119255141.3181523

Company email address: kaiyena.crow@nonanonymous.com

Any combination of the following

Department	Title
Age	Gender
Location	Tenure

Can you think of a specific example of xyz in your time at Nonanonymous?

If it's so specific that it's only ever happened to you, then guess what...?

Anything with a free text field

(Although you can try changing up your writing style)

Anything handwritten !!!

This line: This link is unique to you. Please do not share it

Any report where answers aren't aggregated, and text responses are printed verbatim.

Any report where data comes from fewer than 5 people risks exposing the data sources.

Take care with this if your manager is going to read responses!

Anything you have to email or deliver in person can easily have your name attached to it.

The truth about open feedback

Employees who meet with managers regularly are almost

three times

as likely to be engaged
[Gallup](#)

89%

HR professionals agree personal interaction and coaching from managers drives performance

[Betterworks](#)

The time for anonymous surveys has passed. Confidentiality on sensitive or legal issues may still be necessary, but when you're having conversations about work daily, there's no need to hide inside the data. Open feedback requires people to feel that they can speak up without putting themselves at risk. So the first step to getting honest, authentic feedback, is to make it perfectly normal to give honest, authentic feedback.

As told by Joyous customers

“ We used anonymous feedback, so I knew that to go to open or attributed feedback was going to be a potential stretch. But it really has been a whole lot more successful than I was expecting because people can see that it's not about the individual. It's about the feedback, and the actions that are required from the feedback. That's one of the great things about the Joyous questions. It's not judging how well you as a manager or leader are performing. It's talking about issues and your feelings about certain experiences. It's quite different, and really, really helpful.

“ I wasn't sure if our business was ready for open feedback, so we went through an RFP process and got it down to two options: one question a week anonymous, and one question a week non-anonymous. I presented those to our executive team and they resoundingly supported the non-anonymous transparent feedback option. You just need an executive team that are willing to take that step with you.

“ We didn't set out to choose an anonymous or an open tool, but openness it's 100% the biggest reason why it's been successful. There's no actual competition in the market for Joyous, because if you're actually looking for full transparency and to leap frog change from a culture perspective, the only way to do it is to give it a crack. Right?

“ We actually had feedback in our anonymous survey that people wanted more regular feedback. One of our big macro projects over the last year has been to find ways to help our people have more open and honest conversations every day. Joyous has really helped us with that.

“ We are trying to foster an environment of transparency, openness and empowerment. And when you keep doing an anonymous engagement survey you're very subtly sending a message to people that it's really not safe to speak up here, or have negative views, so we'll protect people with anonymity. But we want people to share their negative views. We want people to share their honest feedback so that we can hear it and take it on board, and do something about it.

And by Joyous!

It's something I've noticed across everyone we've worked with: nobody was sure that their organization was ready for the shift to open feedback. But the bold ones were willing to take that risk, and when they tried it out they realized it was actually OK. They may not have felt ready for open feedback, but they all discovered they were.

Ruby Kolesky - Head of Product, Joyous

Webinar: Creating an Inclusive Employee Feedback Culture

A successful employee feedback program goes far beyond simply sending surveys to your staff once or twice a year. Join our next live webinar to learn how to create an inclusive feedback culture:

Make it easy to talk about work.

Collect feedback in a way that is easy for everyone from your executive to frontline staff who don't work at computers.

Make feedback an ongoing conversation.

Send short questions on a regular basis, follow-up on questions and have meaningful conversations with staff.

Make feedback easy to measure and understand.

Ensure feedback is collected systematically and then quickly identify areas of concern with organization-wide filters and drill-downs.

[Register for the webinar](#)



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