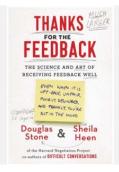# Thanks for the Feedback
The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well
by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

With this ABC, I would like to introduce the first book in a series that we will be reviewing over the next several months. My intent is to more fully acquaint you with a concept we have labeled internally as social learning. This series of books will assist you in promoting and developing it. Rather than getting specific about what we mean by social learning, let me begin with some basic insights from neuroscience to better set the stage.

In order to survive, the human brain had to have the innate ability to learn, and to learn what its social environment demanded. That is, the human brain adapted by prewiring itself both to learn and to be social. As our ancestors discovered, the inability to do either, led to social exclusion and significantly reduced the odds of survival. Our social environment clearly shapes our brain's processes, significantly influencing how we speak, think, interact, and behave. Even in the absence of conscious awareness, we acquire habits, master new skills, gain useful knowledge, adapt, and adjust our reactions to incentives encouraging our social survival. Information processing by the brain underlies thinking, learning, planning, problem solving, and decision making. Our behavior is the manifested outcome of those cognitive and mental processes, as we interpret and give meaning to what we see, hear, and feel. More specifically, if an individual is unable to learn and process social signals – due to deficiencies in the neural circuitries supporting self-awareness, social awareness, threat detection, and self-regulation — the most likely social outcomes are being ignored, isolated, ridiculed, and rejected. In the business world, an individual incapable of interpreting social signals is more likely to be passed over for promotion or even fired, despite having high knowledge for the job. In this ABC, I will focus on what we believe to be the root cause of such deficiencies and how we can begin to look differently at the central role feedback plays in overcoming it.

Let's go back and revisit some basic survey and anecdotal information that serves to highlight the breadth of this social learning concern. A recent Gallup poll found that while 96 percent of university provosts believe their graduates are ready for the workforce, only 11 percent of human resource managers feel the same way. Why the gap? On several occasions we have had CEOs and

Chief Learning Officers ask us: "If we hire the best and pay the best, why do we continue to experience a normal distribution of performance?" Why the gap? Google has digitized the vast majority of literary works written over the past 200 years. In that period of time, studies assessing the Google database have observed a steady increase in the use of the word "I" and the steady decline in the use of the word "we." Why the gap? This difference between the use of "I" and "we" is further accentuated by studies showing that over the past 15 years there has been a 35 percent decline in empathy amongst young people of college age. Why the gap?

Our independent research leads us to conclude that this gap is primarily due to deficiencies in social learning. In other words, while our universities excel at teaching the axioms, theorems, formulas, and principles that make our students the most knowledgeable in history, we are doing it at the expense or in ignorance of those social skills that make them capable of using that learning. That is, while our students may be more knowledgeable, they seem to be getting less capable. Let me use an illustration. Let's assume we have a manager who has difficulty with conflict, so we send him to a course on conflict management taught by an esteemed professor who is an expert on the subject. How can we expect our manager to put into action what he now knows about conflict management from the course when he has a learned fear of confrontation that all but prohibits him from doing so? How does he learn to identify, manage, and overcome this fear to become the more productive and healthy person he wants to be? How can he learn to be receptive to social signals and to better interpret them in order to make his social interactions and behavior more constructive and productive? In this sense, at CIMBA we believe that such deficiencies in social learning are the root cause of the gaps identified above.

To get a sense of this analysis, allow me to take you on a short historical journey. In last month's ABC, we spent considerable time focusing on how the anthropologist's and neuroscience's view that "We are wired to be social" can be functionally translated into the language of management and organizational behavior as "We are wired to be followers." We discussed how the brain's social circuitries — our social brain, and encompassing circuitries assist in self-awareness, social awareness, threat detection, and self-regulation as outlined above – were developed out of a basic need to survive. Once these social prerequisites were met, leaders could then be chosen from a group on the basis of technical prowess. Given the relatively slow pace of evolution, neuroscientists will argue persuasively that our brains differ relatively little from the brains of our ancestors from some 2 million years ago. If our brains are relatively similar, and if we still have a similar need for effective leaders, do we need to be concerned about how we are providing social learning opportunities given the persistence of this observed capabilities gap?

I find this question particularly interesting given our fortuitous location here in Italy. In contemplating this fundamental question, I would like to point you toward the Grand Tours that

had such a significant impact on the development of nobility during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. Aspiring leaders and diplomats from noble families were taken on grand tours of Europe, particularly to Italy, where their teachers and mentors introduced them to the greater world. Not only did they see great works of art and literature, they were also made aware of the feelings and thoughts and emotions those great works evoked. Additionally, teachers and mentors made sense of social interactions at galas, dinners, receptions, and other social events. This was social learning at its pinnacle, experienced and not merely observed. Learning was understood to encompass both technical skills (axioms, theorems, formulas, and principles) and the emotions that influence learners in deciding and prioritizing, as well as in persuading and motivating those with whom they were engaged in interaction and discourse.

In the early 1800's, technology began to provide benefits that significantly improved quality of life. Technology viewed as "force multipliers" moved us from the slingshot to the steam locomotive and beyond, significantly improving our mobility by dramatically reducing its costs. With travel both readily available and relatively inexpensive, a broader range of society was able to afford such travel, bringing the notion of the "Grand Tour" to the masses. Not surprisingly, education followed with teachers and professors finding themselves confronting dozens of students, as opposed to one student being guided through a variety of learning experiences by a teacher and a mentor. Learning moved from the holistic, highly experiential Grand Tour model to the confines of the classroom.

In the early part of this technology wave, information and knowledge were in relatively short supply. To extract as much as possible from limited information, often little more than the professor and his handful of books and notes, students gathered in libraries, restaurants, private homes, and cafés to argue and discuss topics. Importantly, those discussions also provided a rich forum for social learning. While arguably not at the depth provided by a "Grand Tour," the learning opportunity was certainly afforded to a larger number of students. However, while much attention was placed on the information and knowledge being conveyed by the professor or teacher, relatively little attention was placed on explicit social learning. Note that this focus on the teacher or professor as the fount of knowledge and learning differs little through the centuries, as evidenced by comparing drawings and photographs dating back hundreds of years with today's classroom environment.

This relative ignorance of or inattention to social learning did not raise serious concerns until late into our second technology revolution, where technology served as a "communication multiplier." While technology provided a means for us to live further apart, communication technology now made it far less necessary for us to communicate face-to-face. While having an impact on social learning, it is not until we enter our third wave of technology, technology as an "information

multiplier," that the impact on social learning becomes obvious. While a handful of books often defined the body of knowledge on a particular topic 200 years ago, a single computer on virtually any desk or a mobile telephone anywhere in the world has unfettered access to the world's knowledge. A topic's body of knowledge today is incomprehensible by the standards and expectations of just a few decades ago. While we continue to rely on our teachers and professors to make sense of that knowledge, we rely on our computers to assist us with developing a better of understanding of that knowledge through sources such as Wikipedia or Google. We have relatively little need for the interactive, face-to-face, discourse in discussions with others in making sense of the professor's words. Lost is the richness in social learning those interactions provided. But why has social learning been cast aside, when our feeblest self is either ignored or sent off to counselors, psychologists, or, more recently, put on some form of pharmaceutical in an attempt to address the deficiency? What can we do to provide an effective forum for social learning, to close the gap between what our prestigious universities are providing, to provide us with the managers and leaders we desperately need, not just in the work place, but among our friends, in our families, social groups, communities, and beyond?

At CIMBA, we believe we are at the cusp of the world's fourth major technology revolution. As we have discussed, the human propensity for ingenuity and problem-solving has generated three prior revolutions, each dramatically changing the way we live together. First came technology as a force multiplier, greatly facilitating transportation and allowing us to live more independent lives. Next came technologies that multiplied our capacity to communicate. The telegraph, telephone, radio, and television all greatly facilitated the speed of our interactions but all but eliminated the need for them to be face-to-face. Then came a great wave of information technology, with computers and the Internet greatly facilitating learning by making technical knowledge readily available to individual learners at any time of the day or night. The on-going explosion of discoveries in neuroscience is converging with the increasing power and ubiquity of mobile platforms and a new generation of bio-sensors to create the next revolution: an "Awareness Multiplier."   At CIMBA, we see this next technology revolution addressing the growing need to understand ourselves as humans, to understand others, to be aware of the emotions that make us human and that give quality to our lives; a desperate, ubiquitous need for social learning. This next wave of technology has the potential to enable humans to interact and cooperate at levels never before possible. Where does it need to begin? With feedback – an understanding and appreciation of feedback.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines feedback as "the transmission of evaluative or corrective information about an action, event, or process to the original or controlling source." Obviously, the "original or controlling source" in this case is an individual. Let's consider the sources of the "evaluative or corrective information." Obviously, in the workplace, feedback can come in the

form of a performance review or other direct feedback from a boss or subordinate. In addition, feedback can come in the form of "social signals" or social feedback, the type of feedback one derives from the behavior and communication, both verbal and non-verbal, of others. Arguably, the latter of these two forms of feedback is the most prevalent form one receives in the workplace. At CIMBA we would also add the flow of feedback that comes from one's coach, assessments, and quantified-self experiments conducted using a vast array of personal performance measurement technology available to this list. Against this flow of information, or potential flow, I would like to introduce a book by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen entitled Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well.

While many works on feedback are largely technical in nature, and thus are of dubious value in motivating change, the authors fully understand the fundamental and indispensable contribution made by social learning. As an initial matter, the authors understand that while we are wired for learning, "learning about ourselves is a whole different ballgame. Learning about ourselves can be painful – sometimes brutally so – and the feedback is often delivered with a forehead-slapping lack of awareness for what makes people tick." The authors have considerable experience in bringing together the technical and emotional component parts in several other areas where social learning is foundational, particularly in the areas of difficult conversations and negotiations. As most of you who follow this ABC column on a regular basis know, the CIMBA Leadership System is focused on the regulation of emotions. Our ability and desire to learn is strongly associated with our ability to change, to replace and unproductive skill or behavior adversely affected by an emotional fear with a more productive one. In this sense, change is strongly linked to our ability to formulate meaningful goals. In the absence of a goal, incoming information about our "actions" will be interpreted as a problem, activating the brain's threat circuitry. Conversely, information received against a goal about which we are motivated will be interpreted by the brain's reward circuitry. Following this logic, at CIMBA we believe feedback is the primary responsibility of the receiver. Placing the responsibility for feedback upon the receiver is consistent with our Social Brain Theory of Leadership — be receptive to and interpret the social signals, adapt and survive; misinterpret the social signals and risk being ignored, ridiculed, isolated, or rejected. Thus, when I saw that this notion was the primary foundation upon which the authors' work rests, I was motivated to read it. I would like to encourage you to do the same.

The authors make the point that individuals who exhibit "feedback-seeking behavior" — assess incoming information against goals — exhibit higher job satisfaction, greater creativity on the job, faster adaptation in a new organizational role, and lower turnover. Not surprisingly, seeking out negative feedback (we prefer to say, "feedback for improvement") is associated with higher performance ratings. By contrast those who shut out feedback or respond with defensiveness and

arguments often seek to insulate themselves from feedback, which all too often leads to isolation — the very place they fear that seeking such information would take them. The underlying tone of the book places considerable emphasis on social learning as we define it at CIMBA. The authors emphasize the importance of understanding your emotional triggers and working to understand from where those triggers may have arisen. In this sense, it is very much like Column 4 in our 6-Columns Personal Development Analysis in which participants are asked to investigate the assumptions upon which their personal barriers to development are based – fear of rejection, fear of not measuring up, fear of not being liked. Those assumptions are then tested with the results very frequently being the opposite of what the participant expected. As in the 6-Columns, the format and suggestions provided by the authors accentuate the importance of self and social awareness, the essence of social learning.

In closing, I intend to focus the next several ABCs on reviewing interesting works that provide insight into how to overcome shortcomings in social learning by using the growing array of awareness technology at our disposal. Both brain exercises and neurobiofeedback are increasingly becoming more effective in creating "artificial" environments in which we can practice social learning. Data analytics provides us with the ability to analyze and interpret the data that this technology is able to deliver. At CIMBA, we are particularly focused on strengthening key self-awareness, social awareness, threat detection, and self-regulation neural circuitries. By using the technology to multiply our awareness, by strengthening those key neural circuitries, we truly believe we have the potential to enable humans to interact and cooperate at levels never before possible.