

Series Editor's Foreword

Rodney L. Lowman

The field of consulting psychology has blossomed in recent years. It covers the applications of psychology in consultation to organizations and systems but also at the individual and team levels. Unfortunately, there are very few graduate training programs in this field of specialization, so consulting psychology roles are mostly populated by those who came to the field after having trained in other areas of psychology—including industrial–organizational (I-O), clinical/counseling, and school psychology, among others. Yet such training is rarely focused on consulting psychology and psychologists, and graduate students have to learn through on-the-job training and by reading books and articles, attending conferences and workshops, and being mentored in the foundational competencies of the field as they seek to transition into it.

After a number of years of editing *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, the field's flagship journal, I felt that an additional type of educational product was needed to help those transitioning into consulting psychology. The Society of Consulting Psychology therefore partnered with the American Psychological Association and worked with an advisory board (initially consisting of Drs. Judith Blanton, Dale Fuqua, Skipton Leonard, Edward Pavur, Jr., and myself) to create a new book series describing the specific, fundamental skill sets needed to practice in this area of specialization. Our goal in this book series has been to identify the major competencies needed by consulting psychologists and then to work with qualified authors to create short, accessible but evidence-based texts

that would be useful both as stand-alone volumes and in combination with one another. The readers would be graduate students in relevant training programs, psychologists planning a transition into consulting psychology, and practicing professionals who want to add to their areas of expertise.

What constitutes fundamental skills in consulting psychology? The educational guidelines created by the Society of Consulting Psychology and approved by the American Psychological Association (2007) and the *Handbook of Organizational Consulting Psychology* (Lowman, 2002) provide useful starting points. Both of these contributions were organized around the concept of levels (individual, group, and organizational) as a taxonomy for identifying fundamental skills. Within those categories, two broad skill sets are needed: assessment and intervention.

As with many areas of psychological practice, the foundational skills that apply in one area may overlap into others in the taxonomy. Interventions with individuals, as in executive coaching, for instance, usually take place in the context of the focal client's work with a specific team and within a specific organization, which itself may also constitute a client. Understanding the system-wide issues and dynamics at the organizational level usually also involves work with specific executives and teams. And multicultural/international issues suffuse all of our roles. The APA Guidelines and the *Handbook* concluded, properly, that consulting psychologists need to be trained in and have at least foundational skills and experience at the individual, group, and organizational levels, even if they primarily specialize in one of these areas.

In inviting you to learn more about consulting psychology through this book series, I hope you will come to agree that there is no more exciting or inherently interesting area of study today than consulting psychology. The series aims not only to cover relevant literature on timeless topics in consulting psychology but also to capture the richness of this work by including case material that illustrates its applications. Readers will soon understand that consulting psychologists are real-world activists, unafraid to work in real-world environments.

Finally, as one who trained in both I-O and clinical psychology, I should note that consulting psychology has been the one area in which I felt that all of my training and skill sets were both welcome and needed.

And in a world where organizations and the individuals and teams within them greatly need help in functioning effectively; in bridging individual, group, and organization-level needs and constituencies; and in coping with the rapid expansion of knowledge and escalating competition and internationalization, this book series aims to make a difference by helping more psychologists join the ranks of qualified consulting psychologists. Collectively, we can influence not only an area of specialization in psychology, but also the world.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

If you are an organizational consultant, chances are high that you will be spending a good part of your career providing and receiving feedback. And if you are a consulting psychologist—or learning to become one—you will want to know what the research literature has to say about what works best and why and what needs to be avoided.

Gregory and Levy's *Using Feedback in Organizational Consulting* is not a simple “how to” book—though it includes plenty of practical suggestions. Rather, it is a synthesis of what the applied process of giving feedback looks like when integrated with the research literature. It is, therefore, a great guide for evidence-based practice and as such a perfect volume for the Fundamentals of Consulting Psychology series.

How difficult can it be, a novice might understandably wonder, to provide effective feedback? Gregory and Levy make clear that there are many moving parts to providing effective feedback, including the nature and valence of the message, the feedback recipient, and the feedback giver. It is not all that easy to provide effective feedback, particularly when balancing all the elements of feedback while also addressing difficult problems in performance, interpersonal behavior, or character. Not too many consultants—much less supervisors—particularly relish the task of providing feedback. It can be emotionally demanding, and the outcomes are not always predictable. Even positive feedback is not always easy to provide well, because it may also need to include areas requiring attention. Too often the feedback provided is at too intense a level, with little sensitivity to the devastating effects it may be having on the recipient, or, conversely,

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at too superficial a level, such that the recipient goes away thinking everything is proceeding smoothly when in fact there are problems. Staying on message while also being sensitive to the emotional well-being of the person receiving the feedback, yet not pretending issues are not serious or do not need the person's attention, is, like much of the consulting craft, an art that is learned over time. The psychological casualties of providing feedback badly (e.g., too much negative feedback) may have the paradoxical effect of causing problematic behavior to worsen (see, e.g., Nowack & Mashihi, 2012).

These are just some of the reasons why consulting psychologists can be well suited to this competency and why this book is so valuable, important, and timely. Yet this book will be useful for others, as well. Providing effective feedback is an important managerial competency and, increasingly, psychologists are assuming managerial roles. For all of those who are called on to provide work-related feedback to others, Gregory and Levy's book will be a valuable, practical resource for years to come.

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Introduction

*F*eedback is everywhere. Each of us gets it from our colleagues, friends, family members, and sometimes from random people on the street. We get it from tasks, machines, and the world around us. Most feedback is self-generated and appears consistently in our inner monologue as we assess and regulate our behavior throughout the day. It reflects reactions to and outcomes of our actions and behaviors, and it can come in verbal and written forms—and even in our observations of others’ behaviors and expressions, which convey their reactions.

This book provides evidence-based best practices on how to give, receive, and help others deliver feedback in the most effective way possible. We present a straightforward model of the feedback process that is easily applied to practice and draws from decades of consistent findings in the feedback research. This model includes four critical elements of

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Using Feedback in Organizational Consulting, by J. B. Gregory and P. E. Levy
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any feedback exchange: (1) the feedback provider's actions and behaviors, (2) the content of the message, (3) the feedback recipient's beliefs and perceptions, and (4) the context in which feedback is provided. Although consulting psychologists are the intended audience for this book, the concepts presented are also useful to organizational consultants, managers, human resources (HR) professionals, and consultants with nonpsychology backgrounds.

Feedback plays a particularly important role in the work of consulting psychologists. According to the Society of Consulting Psychology (Division 13 of the American Psychological Association; <http://www.apadivisions.org/division-13/index.aspx>), consulting psychologists may work with individuals, groups, and organizational units, depending on the need and scope of the work. The goal of consulting psychology is to help individuals and organizations "become more efficient and effective" (Kurpius, 1978, p. 335). The work of consulting psychologists can take a variety of forms, and individuals who identify as consulting psychologists occupy a number of different roles.

Meet four consultants who appear throughout the following chapters:

- Lane is an internal consultant for a Fortune 100 organization and has a doctorate in industrial–organizational psychology. She designs systems and processes, and provides best practice guidance to HR professionals throughout this global organization. As part of the HR function, she consults widely with HR managers across business units and functions. The focus of her work varies based on business needs and priorities, but she has worked on the organization's annual employee engagement survey, talent management and performance management processes, and learning and development programs.
- Ted works for a large global consulting firm and is considered an expert on organization design, change, transformation, and effectiveness. He is often pulled into projects that focus on less macro topics; however, organizational design, change, and transformation are his areas of passion and expertise. Ted first completed a master's degree in counseling psychology and, later, when he realized how much he enjoyed working in the business world, pursued a master of business administration, with a focus on organizational behavior.

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- Helen and Sylvia often collaborate on projects, although Helen is an independent executive coach and Sylvia works for a small firm that specializes in individual assessment. They met in graduate school, where Helen pursued a doctor of psychology in clinical psychology and Sylvia, a doctorate in consulting psychology.

Although the nature of their work varies slightly, these four consulting psychologists find that feedback is an essential part of their day-to-day business. The focus of that feedback, goal of delivering the feedback, type and frequency of the feedback, and feedback recipients vary from situation to situation; regardless of the context, though, feedback is a critical source of information.

Throughout the following eight chapters, we look closely at the essential role that feedback plays in helping organizations and the individuals within those organizations perform more effectively and efficiently. Chapter 1 provides a quick overview of what we consider to be classic models of feedback in organizations; those models have been most influential in the research and practice of feedback over the past several decades. They introduce critical concepts, such as the important role of individual differences and context in the feedback process, which are discussed in more detail later in the book. In Chapter 2, we explore a foundational theory about feedback processes in goal striving and behavior change: *control theory*, which suggests that feedback is the only way to gauge the gap or distance between our current state and goal state—where we are versus where we want to be. Chapters 3 and 4 get into the specifics of the feedback message itself and how it is delivered. For instance, not only does *what* we say matter, so does *how* we say it. Chapters 5 and 6 provide an overview of the role of individual differences and context in the feedback process. By *individual differences*, we mean unique characteristics that make us who we are, such as personality, motivation, and preferences. *Context* refers to aspects of the organizational environment that impact the feedback process. Chapter 7 focuses on the role of feedback in broader talent management processes, such as performance management, assessment, and coaching. Chapter 8 provides specific recommendations for using feedback in practice and research, and concluding thoughts.

We have structured each chapter to provide an overview of the most essential research and theory on the focal topic, but we also have made a point to discuss this research and theory in terms that are accessible and engaging to our readers. We then focus on the relevance and implications of that research to the workplace by presenting a case study¹ featuring one or more of the four consultants—Lane, Ted, Helen, and Sylvia. Our goal is to not only provide you with a foundation in the most essential feedback research and theory but to arm you with actionable and useful ideas for improving the way you approach feedback in your daily work as a consultant.

¹Although our case studies are based on real-life events, the names of the consultants and some case details have been altered to respect confidence and privacy.