Organizational Consultation XXIV: Feedback (Part One)

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

The final strategy concerns the generation of valid and useful information about the performance of employees in the organization. This information should aligned with the mission, vision, values and purposes of the organization, and should be provided to each employee in a timely and systematic manner. Of the six strategies being considered in this series of essays, it is most important that this sixth strategy be appreciative. Feedback concerns the capacity of an individual to benefit from information about the impact of a specific idea or ongoing performance. It is easy to make this feedback deficit oriented. We are all accustomed to identifying what is wrong with another person. Yet, psychological research over the years has repeatedly shown that negative feedback doesn't produce an improvement in behavior. Humanists tell us that negative feedback diminishes the human spirit. Their polar opposites, the behaviorists, similarly tell us that negative feedback doesn't work.

From the pragmatic perspective of the behaviorist, the process of negative feedback doesn't work because this process typically produces a concerted effort on the part of the recipient of this negative feedback to avoid the source of this feedback. When they are punished for doing something, children learn either to engage in this activity when no one is watching or to avoid the person doing the punishing. This person is usually a parent. There is yet another pragmatic reason for avoiding negative feedback. The behaviorists and humanist both tell us that when we give negative feedback, the recipient may gain a clear idea about what she is *not supposed to do*. However, she usually gains little insight into what she *is to do* in place of the unwanted behavior. Positive feedback is needed to reinforce the desired behavior; otherwise, the recipient of negative feedback, like the often-punished child, will simply withdraw.

Even positive feedback can be ineffective if it is indiscriminate and not appreciative in nature. Positive feedback and praise often feel just as controlling and judgmental as negative feedback, if it is devoid of understanding and care.[i] Rosabeth Moss Kanter has noted that employees can become addicted to praise. They soon begin to set aside their own sense of personal

accomplishment, looking instead for continual positive feedback from their superiors.[ii] This *praise addiction* destroys people's feelings of autonomy. Furthermore, the praise addict, like other addicts, needs increasingly larger doses of praise to feel fulfilled or adequate. "Good" performance reviews are no longer acceptable. The addicted employee feels cheated and dishonored if the reviewer's judgment is anything less than "outstanding."

Appreciative Feedback

What then is appreciative feedback, and how does it differ from positive and negative feedback? Appreciative feedback differs from both positive and negative feedback in that it preserves an employee's sense of autonomy and self-worth. Specifically, feedback is appreciative if it provides information to members of an organization that enable them to freely choose actions that can be of benefit to both themselves and their organization. Feedback is also appreciative if it strengthens the bond between those giving the feedback and those received the feedback. Feedback given in an appreciative manner will increase rather than decrease the recipient's interest in continuing her relationship with the feedback giver.

Appreciative feedback produces collaboration rather than either withdrawal or dependency. The person giving the feedback is likely to be more influential in the future, not less, as a result of the thoughtful, appreciative information they have provided to another person or group. This is the primary distinction to be drawn between appreciative and either positive or negative feedback. Appreciative feedback conveys respect for the person receiving the feedback, while also providing evidence of the feedback giver's sincere intentions to be of help to its recipient. These conditions inevitably increase mutual trust and encourage more frequent interactions and reciprocal feedback. The information provided through appreciative feedback is generally richer and more useful than that provided through either positive or negative feedback.

This important benefit can be simply illustrated by turning to an old childhood game: "Hide the thimble." After a small object, such as a thimble, is hidden in a room, the game player is led to the object by receiving one of two simple instructions: "warmer" (moving closer to the object) and "colder" (moving away from the object). As anyone knows, who has ever played the game, "warmer" is much more helpful than "colder." Negative feedback ("colder") leaves open many

options. There are many ways in which we might move closer to the thimble. Negative feedback is even less helpful in an organizational setting. There are many ways in which we might improve our performance. To be told that we are doing it wrong ("colder") doesn't tell us anything about how we might do it right ("warmer").

Positive feedback ("warmer") provides better information. It tells us specifically that we are moving toward the desired state, the thimble. We have only to continue doing what we are already doing. We don't have to guess what the right way of doing things might be, nor do we have to invent some new behavior pattern or program strategy. Yet, as I noted above, positive feedback still isn't very informative. "Warm" only tells us that we are moving in the right direction. It doesn't tell us where the thimble is located. Imagine how much easier it would be if someone simply described the location of the thimble. This would make the game of "hide the thimble" less interesting—however, feedback in an organizational setting is not a "game" and more detailed descriptions are inevitably more helpful than uni-dimensional statements of good or bad, positive or negative, "warm" or "cold."

When appreciative feedback is offered, the recipient knows that the person giving the feedback has been thoughtful enough, and specific enough, to provide a detailed analysis concerning the recipient's proximity to a desired state. Appreciative feedback also suggests ways in which the feedback recipient might more effectively influence the world in which she is working. The recipient gains helpful information about both location and strategy that can inform future actions in the organization. This is the heart of an appreciative strategy of feedback and is critical in the creation of an appreciative organization.

The Functions of Appreciative Feedback

Formal systems of feedback were originally created as a response to demands for accountability. When we monitor the performance of an individual or department, then we are ensuring that this person or department is doing what it is supposed to do. This function made sense during the modern era of the 20th Century, when prediction and control were the major goals of management. As the 20th Century came to an end, the era of prediction and control also gave way to a new era of appreciation and influence. Feedback has taken on new functions and meets newly emerging needs in organizations that

are faced with complex, unpredictable and turbulent conditions. Formal feedback at either an individual or program unit level now serves many functions, especially when it is appreciative in nature. Twelve functions often are identified in the contemporary literature on feedback, and they each take on special meaning when considered from an appreciative perspective.[iii]

Function One: Personnel/Program Decisions

Feedback can be and often is used to assist leaders and managers in making and justifying difficult decisions regarding retention, promotion and salary for individual employees. Feedback is also used to inform a leader or manager in their decisions regarding the continuation, expansion, modification or termination of an entire program unit. In each case, an appreciative approach is critical, for the decision is being made from the perspective of achievement and future prospects. Do we promote this person? Do we give her additional responsibilities? Do we continue or even expand this program? Do we replicate it elsewhere? These are all questions that require appreciation of an employee's or program's distinctive strengths and potential accomplishments.

As Edward Suchman suggests, significant social experimentation can only occur in a society if some form of evaluation is conducted to determine the *extent* to which an experiment has been successful and the *reasons* for that success which it has achieved:[iv]

> In its broadest framework . . . evaluative research becomes the study of planned programs
> for producing social change through social experiments. These experiments test the
> validity of the hypotheses that the action program has within it elements that will affect
> certain "causal" factors in the development of the desired objectives. . . . What we
> evaluate is the action hypothesis that defined program activities will achieve specified,
> desired objectives through their ability to influence those intervening processes that affect
> the occurrence of these objectives.

Thus, according to Suchman, feedback regarding performance always begins from an appreciative stance. It addresses two questions: What makes the performance successful? This requires an *appreciative examination of causal factors*. What have we learned from this social experiment? This entails an *appreciative leaning into the future*. Specifically, at the level of individual performance, we might say that individual performance appraisals are means to test

two appreciative hypotheses. First, is this specific employee both qualified and motivated to continue operating in their current job at a specific level of compensation? To answer this question, we must *appreciate the context* within which the employee is performing. Second, is this specific employee sufficiently qualified and motivated to operate in a more expanded version of their current job or in a new, more challenging job, at a higher level of compensation? This second question requires a prediction of future performance—another form of *appreciative leaning into the future.* Appreciative feedback at both the individual and program level focuses on the testing of specific appreciative hypotheses that can, in turn, influence important personnel and organizational decisions.

An appreciative feedback system yields several other related benefits. First, it enables a supervisor to make equitable and defensible personnel decisions that comply with affirmative action guidelines and that respond to the growing concern in many organizations with the quality of work life issues. Second, appreciative feedback conveys something about why a specific employee has been successful or unsuccessful and sets this employee's performance within a specific context, so that external influences can also be assessed. Thus, an appreciative feedback system provides organizational leaders with the kind of detailed, systemic information about employee effectiveness that can be used for equitable and defensible decisions regarding future personnel directions.

An appreciative approach to feedback is particularly appropriate if there is widespread concern for quality of work life. Appreciation also thrives in a *collaborative culture* that encourage employees, customers, and other stakeholders to engage in, or at least be consulted about, personnel decisions. Conversely, a more deficit-oriented approach to feedback is likely to find a home in organizations that are oriented toward quick solutions and tangible results. The *productivity culture* that reigns supreme in these organizations is based on twin priorities: time and productivity. Deficit-based feedback does do a better job in this culture than appreciative feedback. Deficit-based assessments quickly pinpoint areas where an employee is not performing at an adequate level. Key decision-makers in a productivity culture want to know immediately and specifically where the flaw in their organization is located. Deficit-based feedback can readily yield this information, provided it is being collected in a timely and systematic manner.

Function Two: Development/Training

Appreciative feedback can serve as a basis for planning many forms of employee training and education, whether the feedback is given to an individual employee or to an entire program unit. This is where the fourth appreciative strategy (development) links directly with this sixth strategy (feedback). The linkage between development and feedback is particularly strong if the appreciative feedback system brings together observation, diagnosis, training and coaching. An appreciative feedback system will evaluate only those behaviors, skills, attitudes and bases of knowledge for which the organization can provide developmental resources.

Don't evaluate what you can't help improve—this is a mantra of appreciation. If developmental resources are not provided, then the evaluation becomes a destructive tool that punishes an employee or program unit rather than pointing the way to improvement. If I have been told that I must improve in a specific area but have not been given an opportunity to receive training and follow-up coaching in this area, then I have two alternatives—neither of which is very constructive. I can dismiss the feedback as trivial or biased. I risk appearing defensive and resistant to change if I take this stance. Alternatively, I can accept the feedback as accurate and important, and then choose to live with the depressing prospect of continuing negative feedback and little personal improvement.

Both a deficit and an appreciative approach to feedback can serve this second function. Deficit-based feedback indicates what is missing, hence points directly to the areas where training and education should be engaged. However, a deficit-based feedback system provides little information with regard to the reason that an employee is not already skillful or knowledgeable in a particular area or about the reason that this specific skill or knowledge will be of benefit to the employee in their current job and work setting:[v]

> . . . [deficit] feedback may indicate the need to improve performance but not provide a
> sufficiently clear and detailed path to improvement. If reviewers fail to specify in detail
> particular developmental needs and action to be taken in pursuit of them, employees may
> be left more frustrated and confused than they were prior to feedback.

Furthermore, a deficit-based model doesn't yield much information about the employee's strengths; yet, we know from many studies that an effective employee development program should build on the

strengths of the employee rather than just focusing on employee's weaknesses. For instance, in what settings are employees most competent and most highly motivated? We can use the answer to this question in designing a training program that at least in part replicates this setting. We also might want to identify an employee's preferred learning style or the predominant learning style of a program unit with which we are working. The strengths that are embedded in these preferred styles can then be engaged in an educational program that we are offering.

Function Three: Intention-Focused Assessment

Feedback can be linked to the identification and measurement of specific organizational intentions. In this way feedback, as the sixth appreciative strategy, is directly related to the third appreciative strategy, chartering. Organizational alignment occurs when there are not only clear statements regarding the mission, vision, values and purposes of the organization, but also when the feedback being given to individuals and program units focus specifically and consistently on these domains of organizational intention.

An employee or program unit is judged to be successful to the extent that a previously established set of objectives, outcomes, expectations or milestones has been attained within a specific time period. In this way the organization can make use of feedback as a tool for monitoring the organization's alignment with specific intentions and consequently as a vehicle for both tactical and strategic planning. If the organization has established a charter (see earlier essays) to which the employees of the organization are deeply committed, then this third function will be particularly important and effectively served by an appreciative organization.

A deficit-based system of feedback will partially fulfill this third function, though, as I mentioned above, neither negative ("cold") nor positive ("warm") information are as rich as appreciative information ("here's where you are in relation to the thimble") in directing an organization toward its mission, vision, values or purposes. An appreciative approach links much better than deficit processes with an employee's ongoing career planning and movement up a career ladder (see earlier essays). In a similar manner, regularly scheduled, appreciative feedback for leaders of program units aids them in their tactical planning. This ongoing feedback process for program units, which is often labeled *formative*

evaluation, is of much greater value to program leaders than are *summative evaluation* systems that are only enacted at the end of a particular program review period.

Function Four: Team Building

Feedback can serve as a team-building procedure, provided it is appreciative in nature. Members of a leadership team can improve their teamwork by sharing evaluative data in a constructive, problem-solving manner. As Reilly and McGourty have noted: "a feedback report can be used as a starting point for a dialogue between team members regarding how they can function more effectively."[vi] If the feedback being shared in the team is appreciative, then team members will also want to start a dialogue regarding the occasions when they work very successfully together. If they focus on their strengths and moments of effectiveness, then they will also be more inclined to work cooperatively with one another and build toward shared goals. They will identify the location of their shared vision (the thimble), rather than each member providing isolated judgments ("warm" or "cold").

If the feedback that team members give to one another is only negative, then team members are likely to grow defensive. They will move away from one another and focus on their own individual problems or on those areas where their need for improvement has been publicly acknowledged. This doesn't mean that negative feedback should be avoided; it only means that negative feedback needs to be set within an appreciative context. If the feedback is superficially positive, then credibility is lost and team members begin to feel manipulated. They often begin to view the praise offered by other team members as either condescending or thoughtless.

Appreciative feedback being used for team building purposes always involves the interweaving of positive and negative assessments. The strengths revealed in the positive assessment are used to address the problems inherent in the negative assessment. This appreciative assessment might focus on the performance of individual members or on the overall performance of the team. Individual feedback typically is not confined to the assessment of any one member's performance; rather, it includes the sharing of perceptions among team members about each other's performance. Organizational leaders can build an effective team by comparing perceptions of each other's performance (see also Function Ten). If this feedback is given in a manner that evokes dialogue and inquiry rather than defensive game-playing then team building will occur. The process of 360-Degree feedback and the Three Tier feedback

system, that I describe in a later essay, is particularly effective as a team building tool, provided it is appreciative in nature and paired with individual coaching processes.

A third team building benefit is often overlooked. A team must identify the criteria that underlie an evaluation whenever either an individual or programmatic evaluation is initiated. As a result, the intentions of the organization inevitably become clearer, and more tangible and relevant to those working in the organization. It is only when "the rubber hits the road"—that is, when the accountability, evaluation and feedback systems are taken seriously—that an organizational charter is also taken seriously by employees. If an appreciative feedback system is built on the foundation of a clear statement of intentions, then the activities of an organization will inevitably be aligned with these intentions.

Function Five: Identification of Staffing Needs

Feedback can be used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of staff members in order to identify immediate staffing needs, and plan for staffing needs in the future. This fifth feedback function links directly with the Assessment strategy, and, specifically, the creation of a Human Resource Bank. As I noted in an earlier essay, a performance appraisal system can readily be modified to generate information regarding exceptional employee skills, knowledge and aptitudes. This information can, in turn, be used to construct a Human Resource Bank and select employees who are qualified to conduct peer-based training and education programs. When used in this manner, individual and program feedback can serve as a linchpin for all five of the other appreciative strategies being presented in this series of essays.

Deficit-based feedback can also partially serve this fifth function. When performance appraisals are being conducted with all employees, then the staffing needs of an organization become quite clear. The skills and knowledge that are absent in the organization are readily identified. This analysis of deficits can guide organizational leaders in their recruitment of new employees or in their creation of new training or education programs. Nevertheless, an appreciative feedback system that focuses on strengths will ultimately be of greater value to leaders as they put together an integrated human resource development plan for their organization. *You need to know what resources you already have before*

planning for the acquisition of resources you don't have. This is another key element in creating an appreciative organization.

Appreciative feedback processes also help organizational leaders address a troublesome dilemma regarding succession planning. The leaders of most contemporary organizations wish to make long-term commitments to their employees; yet, they must also prepare for major shifts in staffing needs that are responsive to changing conditions in the world their organization serves. Systematic performance review systems can be of particular value in this regard if they are used to identify enduring strengths among employees in the organization. What skills, knowledge and aptitudes does this employee possess that will be of value in many settings? Contemporary organizational leaders will invest in the ongoing education and training of an employee if they know of enduring skills, knowledge and aptitudes that their employees possess and can deploy for many years to come.

Function Six: Monitoring Of Compliance

A systematic feedback system can provide information to governing boards and senior administrators about the degree of congruence between the stated policies, procedures and priorities of the organization, on the one hand, and the actual actions being taken by members of the organization, on the other hand. This information can, in turn, be used to insure compliance with these policies, procedures and priorities. In addition, external audiences, such as legislators, funding agencies, foundations, customers and other interested constituencies can be kept up to date on organizational efforts and achievements.

It is hard to remain appreciative when serving this sixth function. It is closely aligned with the deficit model of feedback and relates directly to the prediction and control model of management that was prevalent in 20th Century organizations. There is still room for appreciation, however, in serving this function. In large part, this is because there have been many documented instances where a deficit-based feedback system has misled rather than assisted leaders in their assessment of compliance in an organization. People often lie when asked to indicate whether another employee is complying with company policies. Truthful evaluations would display a lack of loyalty to one's colleagues. We often don't comply with a mandate to monitor the compliance of those with whom we work. So someone is given the job of monitoring the monitoring process . . . and a paradoxical condition replicates itself.

There is, therefore, a role to be played by appreciation in serving this sixth function. The key factor is the understanding of context and setting. Only an appreciative approach to the monitoring of compliance provides an in-depth analysis of the settings in which compliance is being requested. Policies, procedures and priorities are not simply followed or ignored. They are always enacted to varying degrees within a specific setting. This setting may be one in which policies, procedures and priorities are readily modified to fit with the distinctive needs, demands or cultural characteristics of the employees or customers. It is also possible that there may be so much anger, mistrust, or sense of powerlessness among employees in this setting, that strict monitoring of compliance leaves employees alienated from colleagues and aligned with the interests of upper-level management. The setting must be fully appreciated in any compliance monitoring system, if this system is to be constructive and fair.

Function Seven: Equitable Treatment

Feedback becomes an appropriate vehicle to ensure equity of treatment in many organizations. This is especially the case when the feedback allows subordinates or customers to evaluate those to whom they report or those who serve them. A comprehensive feedback system allows each major constituency of an organization to provide evaluative information regarding the performance of every other major constituency. This comprehensive scope is the key feature of the 360-Degree feedback systems, to which I will turn in a later essay. When feedback is given in an appreciative manner, then this feedback will inevitably be viewed as constructive and helpful to all constituencies. When the feedback is oriented toward deficits, then it can be quite destructive.

Negative feedback can be particularly damaging—and often distorted—if it involves upward review of managerial performance by subordinates. Abundant negative feedback often leads to backlash from people at the top of the organization, if employees over whom they have considerable power are being asked to provide this feedback. As a result, deficit-based evaluations of supervisors will often be ineffective. Intimidated employees will offer only superficial or falsely positive feedback regarding the formal leadership of the organization. Frustrated employees, who believe they have nothing to lose or that a shield of confidentiality protects them, will use this opportunity for negative feedback to vent their anger, rather than offering a balanced picture of their boss' strengths and weaknesses. These recurrent problems, that are inherent in deficit-based assessments, diminish the value of many 360-Degree feedback systems. Yet, these systems continue to proliferate in 21st Century organizations! I will say

more about the important role played by appreciative perspectives in 360-Degree feedback processes in a later essay.

Those who make use of an appreciative feedback system should be fully committed to both constructive evaluation and equitable treatment of all employees. If they act consistently on both of these commitments, then those providing appreciative feedback will be helping to create an organization in which employees want to be productive and all stakeholders feel like their work is being acknowledged. An equitable and appreciative feedback system will help leaders of the organization identify the distinctive talents of all members of the organization. This appreciation of distinctive talents in the organization will, in turn, assist current leaders in their identification and nurturing of future leaders at all levels in the organization. An equitable and appreciative approach to feedback also places the performance of individual employees within a broad context. Praise and blame are assigned to the system rather than to an individual employee or program unit. Primary attention is directed toward *identification of systemic pathways to effective performance*. This is another key point in creating an appreciative organization. In this way, each employee gains a clearer and more consistent sense of being treated in an equitable manner:

Function Eight: Documentation and Evidence

Appreciative feedback can be used to convince both internal and external stakeholders that an employee or program unit is valuable. Internal audiences (board members, customers, employees) and external parties (taxpayers, government officials, members of an overseer board) can be shown feedback-based documents demonstrating that members of the organization not only perform effectively, but also perform functions essential to the organization. If formal feedback systems were initially driven by an emphasis on accountability, then it is important to recognize that this emphasis still exists—though in a somewhat different form. There is still a lingering concern that employees should be monitored and reviewed, even if we can no longer either prediction or control their actions or the resultant outcomes. Today, we look for evidence that something has made an impact, even if we cannot be confident about the ultimate cause of this impact.

Much of the contemporary concern for accountability seems to center on money. The leaders of many 21st Century organizations must make the case for expenditure of scarce financial and personnel resources. The abundance of the 1990s has slipped away with the collapse of the dot.coms and the insanity of September 11, 2001. An appreciative feedback system is essential if both the cost and benefit sides of a financial analysis are to be properly addressed. A deficit-based feedback system can effectively address the cost side of the ledger, but it yields little about benefits. Deficit-analyses usually focus on costs associated with the performance of specific employees or program units. These costs include rates of failure or flaws in a system, wasted time and inefficiency, and discrepancies between desired outcomes and actual program outcomes.

In most cases, this cost-oriented analysis yields little information that is of much use to either internal or external stakeholders in their decision-making processes. What about the assessment of benefits? This type of assessment usually relies heavily on appreciative analyses. An appreciative appraisal is made of the achievements that can be attributed to specific employees or program units in the organization. An appreciative appraisal uncovers unintended and indirect benefits that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. *Appreciation enhances perceived value*. This is yet another key point in creating an appreciative organization. The costs identified in an analysis of deficits are counterbalanced by the benefits identified through an appreciative analysis. The eighth feedback function is clearly aligned with an appreciative approach to feedback.

Function Nine: Research and Development
The feedback documents of an organization are rich and often untapped sources of information regarding the reasons why certain employees and programs are successful. Once confidentiality has been ensured, the research and development unit of an organization can use these documents to test various hypotheses regarding the effectiveness of individual employees or entire programs. Obviously, the most valuable information concerns instances when the individual or the program has been highly effective. This requires an appreciative analysis of the individual or program unit within its specific context. A deficit model tells us very little about the reason why some person or program has been successful. Typically, a deficit perspective directs attention toward the inadequacies of individual performers, whereas an appreciative perspective directs attention toward systemic factors that produce success.

In describing the differences between a traditional Human Resource Management (HRM) and a Quality orientation to organizational effectiveness, Robert Cardy captures several of the key differences that also exist between deficit and appreciative orientations:[vii]

> The field of HRM has focused on people rather than the system. A major assumption underlying HRM is, simply stated, people matter. . . . Much of HRM is focused on measuring individual differences in workers in performance or characteristics believed to be related to performance. The HRM field has assumed that worker motivation is largely determined by extrinsic factors. While intrinsic motivation has sporadically been recognized as potentially important . . . the thrust has been on setting extrinsic contingencies to maximize performance.

I would paraphrase Cardy in offering a similar analysis of deficit-oriented approaches to increasing organizational effectiveness. The deficit-based model of organizational effectiveness has focused on individual employees rather than the system. A major assumption underlying deficit-based models of feedback is, simply stated, that individual performance and individual employees do matter. Most deficit-oriented feedback systems are focused on measuring the individual differences of workers in their performance or characteristics that are related to this performance, particularly as these differences contribute to our understanding of performance deficits. Deficit-based feedback is based on the assumption that worker motivation is largely determined by extrinsic factors. While intrinsic motivation has sporadically been recognized as potentially important . . . the thrust has been on setting extrinsic contingencies to maximize high quality performance and, in particular, to minimize deficient performance.

According to Cardy, a quality orientation, like an appreciative orientation, places primary emphasis on the system rather than the individual. It also focuses on the intrinsic sources of employee motivation:[viii]

> A fundamental assumption of the quality approach is that system factors matter the most when it comes to performance. . . . Underlying the focus on system improvements is the quality assumption that people are intrinsically motivated to perform well. The emphasis from the quality perspective is on removing system barriers to performance. Removal of barriers is assumed to provide an opportunity for the natural motivation of workers to be released. The quality approach assumes that the motive force in workers is already there:

it is simply a matter of removing the factors that block workers from performing at their maximum. . . This is in sharp contrast to the approach taken by traditional HRM.

An appreciative orientation compliments Cardy's quality orientation in that it embraces similar assumptions about systems and intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, an appreciative feedback system provides the analytic tools that are needed to identify those features of the system that are most conducive to effective individual and program unit performance. Rather than just looking for barriers, *an appreciative analysis identified the nature and recurrent gateways and pathways to quality in an organization*. This is a key point that is shared by the appreciative and quality perspectives. Rather than placing blame, the appreciative leader builds understanding of the complex factors contributing to effective performance in an organization by either an individual member or program unit.

Cardy continues:[ix]

> Since [deficit] appraisal has been focused on the person, the [person being evaluated] has been presumed guilty of any performance deficiencies. With the more inclusive [appreciative] approach of including both person and system factors, there is the potential for shifting appraisal to a partnership between rater and ratee in an effort to improve performance rather than place blame. Rather than automatically focusing on the worker as the sole source of performance, the stage is set for examining the multiple causes of performance and what can be done about them.

When organizational leaders come to fully appreciate a specific setting that yields productive results, then they will soon recognize the many ways in which all members of the organization contribute to its success. When this level of appreciation is attained, it becomes much easier for the leaders of an organization to sustain and reinforce this productive setting, as well as replicate the salient features of this setting in other units of their organization.

Function Ten: Perception Checks

Several additional benefits are often found when specific kinds of feedback systems are used. First, either deficit or appreciative feedback can help those being evaluated determine whether or not they understand the perceptions that other people have of their performance or the performance of their program unit. A feedback system can be designed so that the employee or

leader of the program unit being appraised is asked to predict how other people will appraise their work. A comparison between the employee's or leader's expectations and the actual results obtained reveals the extent to which the employee or program leader is aware of the perceptions held by other people. If the predictions of the employee or leader are too far off, the person being appraised might wish to reexamine and modify ways in which feedback is obtained or interpreted in her workplace or program unit.

While either a deficit or appreciative feedback system enables one to check their perceptions, only an appreciative approach encourages one to do something about the outcomes of this perception check that is constructive. An appreciative approach encourages dialogue regarding the discrepancy, whereas a deficit approach tends to encourage defensiveness and a desire to correct or at least argue about the discrepant perceptions. When feedback incorporates a commitment to viewing all performances by an employee or program unit within its own distinct context, then the perceptions of other people regarding one's performance will inevitably yield a clearer and fuller understanding of the context itself. As a result, in an appreciative organization, the diverse and sometimes divergent perceptions of other employees contribute to new learning regarding the nature and impact of one's performance in the organization.

Function Eleven: Role Clarification

Appreciative feedback can help an employee and his supervisor to continually redefine his role in the organization. If the criteria for evaluating work performance are fully specified and applied in a thoughtful and appreciative manner, the subordinate and supervisor will often become clearer about the subordinate's functions and responsibilities. The periodic clarification and revision of roles that often attend systematic and appreciative feedback is particularly appropriate in an organization that frequently experiences change. Appreciative feedback is also particularly valuable when the recipient of this feedback serves in a highly complex position in that organization and if she must frequently meet changing needs and demands. People who face these challenging conditions certainly do not need a deficit-based analysis. They need to know what they *are to do*—not what they *are not to do*. An appreciative approach is welcomed and needed.

Function Twelve: Modeling

Perhaps the most important function of an appreciative feedback process, when it is performed at the top of an organization, is its effect on all other parts of the organization. The high level executive or leader of a high status program unit who willingly participates in a feedback process will serve as a model and incentive for appreciative feedback processes being enacted by subordinates, peers and other program units in the organization. The academic dean at a small liberal arts college in New England was one of the first participants in an appreciative, self-evaluative process that led to the creation of professional growth contracts for administrators and faculty. The success of this process at this college is due, at least in part, to the fact that this academic dean participated in it as a high level administrator. A staff member at this small liberal arts college who sees that a key administrator is undergoing systematic feedback is less likely to resist her own evaluation—provided the evaluation is appreciative in nature for both the dean and faculty member. If the evaluation focuses on deficits, then the administrator is modeling nothing more than defensive bravery: "See, I can take it, so can you!"

I have worked with many organizations in recent years that have engaged actively in 360-Degree feedback processes. While this process can be quite constructive, it can also be very destructive, if deficit based. In many cases, the chief administrator of the organization doesn't engage in the deficit-based 360-Degree feedback process because he believes it will be of much benefit to him. Rather, he undergoes this painful ordeal because, in some way, it shows other members of the organization that he is not afraid to receive their critical comments. In addition, he may be demonstrating to other members of the organization that he is immune to their "ill-informed" or "spiteful" comments. Nothing changes. Positions and perspectives become even more entrenched. The 360-Degree feedback process becomes tainted for everyone in the organization, given that the CEO is modeling the misuse of this feedback. Typically, this misuse doesn't stop the process. Everyone is required to participate in this highly destructive and ultimately ineffective trial by fire. "If I must go through this gauntlet, then, by Jove, all my subordinates must do through it too!" And it continues on and on . . .

---

[i] Tom Coens and Mary Jenkins. *Abolishing Performance Appraisals*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000, p. 130.
[ii] Rosabeth Moss Kanter. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books, 1977.
[iii] This list of functions is based on more detailed descriptions and discussions regarding the functions of feedback and performance appraisals that can be found in William Genova, Marjorie Madoff, Robert Chin, and George Thomas, *Mutual Benefit Evaluation of Faculty and Administrators in Higher Education*. Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger Publishing. Co., 1976, Chapter 3; James W. Smither (ed.). *Performance Appraisal: State of the Art in*

Practice. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998; and Tom Coens and Mary Jenkins. *Abolishing Performance Appraisals*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000.

[iv] Edward Suchman. *Evaluative Research*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1967, p. 177.

[v] Paul Squires and Seymour Adler, "Linking Appraisals to Individual Development and Training," in James W. Smither (ed.). *Performance Appraisal: State of the Art in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, p. 486.

[vi] Richard Reilly and Jack McGourty, "Performance Appraisal in Team Settings," in James W. Smither (ed.). *Performance Appraisal: State of the Art in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, p. 263.

[vii] Robert Cardy, "Performance Appraisal in a Quality Context: A New Look at an Old Problem," in James W. Smither (ed.). *Performance Appraisal: State of the Art in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, pp. 136-137.

[viii] Robert Cardy, "Performance Appraisal in a Quality Context: A New Look at an Old Problem," in James W. Smither (ed.). *Performance Appraisal: State of the Art in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, p. 136.

[ix] Robert Cardy, "Performance Appraisal in a Quality Context: A New Look at an Old Problem," in James W. Smither (ed.). *Performance Appraisal: State of the Art in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, p. 153.