About four years ago, I had what then seemed like an odd experience but today would be quite ordinary. I bought a snack at a gas station, and as soon as my credit card went through, two smiley faces popped up on the screen (well, one smiling, the other frowning). “How was your experience today?” the screen asked.

Soliciting feedback has been standard practice for teachers since long before my gas station experience. And it goes beyond clicking on a happy or sad face. Teachers routinely give students surveys or exit tickets, or check in 1:1 to learn how a lesson went. Skillful team leaders (STLs) use similar methods with their colleagues to learn how a team meeting went.

While you might be tempted to skip asking your team for feedback at the end of a meeting, perhaps because time is short or you are concerned that it will feel like a burden to your colleagues, please don’t. Feedback creates opportunities for people to reflect and speak out. It gives you a feel for how things are going. STLs establish a habit of giving and getting feedback, during and after meetings, so that people come to expect it as part of the collaborative process. They are thoughtful about what they ask and how they ask it. They make the feedback public and share with their colleagues how it will shape their next leadership moves.

**STL moves:**

10.1 Design feedback questions.
10.2 Hear what’s hard.
10.3 Make feedback public.

**What these moves promote:**

*Reflection.* Soliciting feedback invites your colleagues to reflect on how they and others participate in team meetings and what they need in order to further advance team goals.

*Voice.* These moves give people an opportunity to voice what is and is not working for them as learners.

*Communication.* Feedback slips and surveys are not the best means for working out problems. However, they can be used to indicate there is a concern for follow-up.

*Awareness.* People reflect on their team’s collaboration and their contributions to their team’s function and impact.
When to use these moves:
Solicit feedback throughout a meeting and more formally at the end of every team meeting or when a course of inquiry has moved through a full cycle.

10.1 Design feedback questions.

Have you ever led a meeting or workshop for your colleagues where you sensed that something was off, but when you asked people for feedback afterward, they told you that everything was “fine”? In some cases, people withhold candid feedback because they are not comfortable giving it. But in other cases, it’s the question that stifles their response. Skillful team leaders (STLs) are intentional about how they design feedback questions.

How to design feedback questions:
Consider the following before writing your feedback questions:

- **Purpose:** What do I (or my team) want to learn from or about my colleagues? Be clear about what you need to find out in order to improve the function and/or impact of the team. Imagine how people will respond to your question. If you already think you know the answer, it is probably not worth asking unless you are looking for confirmation.

- **Type:** Specific or broad? A specific question such as “How satisfied were you with our team decision-making process today?” can focus the feedback you get. Doug Stone and Sheila Heen (Talks at Google, 2014) recommend that you write a question about one specific thing, and that you give people permission to be honest and invite them to be specific. That said, a more general question such as “What worked today?” can give people free rein to shed light on something you didn’t think to ask. Both types of questions are worthwhile.

- **Time:** How much time do people realistically have to give feedback? If you are short on time, try feedback slips, polls, or a Google Form, or request one comment jotted on a sticky note.

- **Bias:** Do my feedback questions contain bias? How can I rewrite questions so that I don’t influence responses? Remove language that reflects your own position. For instance, instead of asking, “How much do you agree with the following statement? ‘School administrators have no regard for teacher voice and obstruct our instructional decisions,’” ask, “How much do you agree with the following statement? ‘We are able to make instructional decisions.’”

- **Processing:** How easily will I be able to read through feedback, make sense of it, and use it to shape future decisions? Open-ended questions (those that cannot be answered with a yes or no or single answer choice) on a feedback
form can give you a good understanding of what everyone is thinking. However, they will only be useful if you have the capacity to read through everyone’s comments, interpret them, and format them in a way that allows you to then share them with the team. Sometimes closed questions are preferable for this reason.

**STL recommendations:**

*Don’t ask for two things at once.* Because you are looking for specific feedback, you should avoid asking a question that won’t tell you clearly what you need to know. It’s common to want to keep a survey short and combine two questions into one, but this will only result in ambiguity when you are reviewing responses. If you want to know two things, ask two questions. Also, avoid double-barreled questions when designing student-learning assessments (see Move 7.3).

*Be consistent when possible.* Reduce the burden of answering feedback questions. Ask the same open-ended questions consistently at each meeting. Or, if giving a survey, keep the same rating scale for every question (e.g., “Rate on a scale of 1 [strongly disagree] to 5 [strongly agree] how much you agree with each of the given statements”). When you do that, people will know what to expect and won’t need to take time to process the questions.

*Give people adequate time to think.* Save a few minutes at the end of a meeting to ensure that people have time to give feedback. You may not find out what you need if people are rushing out the door.

*Invite personal responsibility.* Feedback forms are not meant to serve as a complaint file. Yes, you want to know what isn’t working, but your role as leader is not to solve everything for everyone. Make your colleagues part of the solution. After soliciting feedback, empower people to think about what they can do to move themselves and the team forward. Include a question such as “What are your next steps?”

*Think like a teacher:*

Feedback from students helps teachers learn what to stop, start, continue, and tweak. As an effective teacher, you regularly solicit feedback from students. Some of the nonverbal methods used during a lesson might include the following:

*Dipstick*—Learners indicate understanding or approval with a thumbs-up, thumbs-sideways, or thumbs-down (see Move 8.16).

*Fist to five*—Learners indicate understanding or approval with their fingers. One finger indicates a low favorability or understanding, and up to five fingers indicates greater favorability or understanding.

*Sticky notes parking lot*—Learners write feedback on a sticky note and “park” it on a piece of chart paper hanging on the wall for the teacher to read.
Color-coded cards—Learners place a red card on their desk if they are stuck and need immediate help, a yellow card if they have a question that is not urgent, and a green card on their desk if they are all set.

It’s fine to incorporate quick feedback opportunities like these in your team meeting, but be cautious about treating adults as students. Level up language (see Move 3.5) if you use any of the above. And don’t let quick checks throughout a meeting substitute for methods of collecting more meaningful feedback on things such as exit tickets, surveys, and focus groups.

Find the right words:

- Take any specific prompt from the STL Meeting Reflection Tool (Figure 29) and frame it as an agree/disagree statement. For example:
  - On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), how much do you agree that our team . . . ?

- Generic sentence prompts:
  - Something that worked is . . .
  - Something that would have made this meeting better is . . .
  - My question/concern is . . .
  - My next steps are to . . .

Related readings:

Move 6.11, “(Heartfelt) Connect to what matters,” Figure 24. This tool provides survey questions that you can ask your colleagues when you are setting direction for your team. They will give you a sense of people’s commitment to the team goal, the likelihood that they will implement actions to achieve that goal, and their comfort and confidence in the group’s decision-making processes.

Move 8.16, “Reach agreement on group decisions.” Methods such as dipsticking and conducting an inverse poll explored in this move can be used to solicit feedback about individual understanding or favorability among choices.

10.2 Hear what’s hard.

As Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen point out in their book Thanks for the Feedback (2015), you can’t control what feedback people give you or how they express it; you can only decide what to let in, how you will interpret it, and whether or not to change because of it. This empowers you, but also requires you to have the discipline not to dismiss feedback that is difficult for you to hear. Skillful team leaders (STLs) intentionally choose to hear what’s hard because it makes them better leaders.
How to hear what’s hard:

I recommend this move throughout this book, but here I describe how to actually do it. I know, from firsthand experience, it’s not easy. Listen to the hard-to-hear feedback. If your immediate response is to dismiss it or respond to the person who gave it, don’t do that just yet. Recognize your reaction as normal, press pause, and reflect on the following four things:

1. **Affect.** Am I having an emotional response to the feedback given to me? Am I reacting to the person who delivered this feedback or the feedback itself? Is my reaction influenced by the timing or manner in which they gave me this feedback? How is this emotion affecting my body, mental state, and spirit?
   - **Body:** Tension, nausea, shortness of breath?
   - **Mind:** Rationalizing, defending, self-doubting?
   - **Spirit:** Injured pride, isolation, depression, fight-freeze-or-flight mode?

2. **Understanding.** What do I understand the feedback to mean? Do I need clarification?

3. **Truth.** What truth might this feedback hold? Am I ready to hear it? If not, why not?

4. **Action.** In what ways can I use this feedback to improve our collaboration or myself as a leader?

In action:

*Helena looks through her team’s feedback forms with her leadership coach at the end of her meeting and sees one from her colleague that says, “I know you mean well, but I feel like you are talking at us too much.”*

**Helena:**  
*Body* As I initially read this feedback, I feel sick to my stomach. I notice my jaw clenching and my shoulders tightening each time I reread it.

**Helena:**  
*Mind* As I reflect, I realize I had to talk a lot in this meeting because I was explaining a strategy that I’ve used successfully and everyone was supposed to implement. Other people on the team gave positive feedback; so maybe this was just this one person’s experience. Someone is always going to complain about something. I might be rationalizing my actions.

**Helena:**  
*Spirit* I feel deflated. There’s a part of me that wonders if it would be better to step down to let someone else lead the next meeting.
Helena: [Understanding] What is this person trying to communicate to me that I’m having a hard time hearing? The person saw me as someone who was telling them what to do instead of collaborating with them. They wanted more voice in our conversation.

Helena: [Truth] I designed the meeting in a way that would give my colleagues opportunities to collaborate, but I recognize that in the meeting, I micromanaged the conversation. I think this is because I was afraid that they would leave the meeting not knowing how to do the strategy. Possibly, too, I see myself as the one needing to teach them how to do it.

Helena: [Action] When the next opportunity presents itself, I will set a time limit for me to do my explanation and then pose a question about the work that I really don’t know the answer to. That will give everyone I’m leading an opportunity to contribute.

STL recommendations:

Give yourself time. This move is about listening and learning, not about how to respond to the person who gave you the feedback. If you have an immediate, strong emotional response to what’s been said, you may need to let the feedback marinate before being able to absorb it. That’s OK.

“Let it go.” When Elsa sings this song in Disney’s Frozen, I can certainly relate. Stone and Heen (2015) write about a person’s “sustain time” and “recovery time” from the point of receiving feedback. Sustain time is the amount of time you dwell on feedback. In other words, how long do you celebrate after hearing positive feedback? Recovery time is the amount of time you perseverate (maybe even come down on yourself) after you receive negative feedback. (Confession: I’ve got a short sustain time and too long a recovery time. I continue to work on hearing what’s hard, without being hard on myself. Let it go.)

Seek feedback from those you trust. STL Daryl Campbell shared that he received a piece of critical honest feedback that ultimately shaped who he is now as an educator, but at the time he found it hard to hear. He says it’s easier to see the truth in hard-to-hear feedback when that feedback comes from someone you trust and consider credible. You know they care about you and want you to succeed. If you don’t have a relationship with the person who is giving you the hard-to-hear feedback, seek someone whom you do trust to help you process what’s been said.

10.3 Make feedback public.

I know that you have at one time in your life as a partner, parent, or educator taken extensive time and been thoughtful before giving someone feedback, only to wonder if they actually took it in. Not only do skillful team leaders (STLs) solicit feedback after team meetings; they also intentionally share it with their colleagues so that their team members know that they have been heard.
How to make feedback public:
With your team, either share direct quotes from feedback received, or share common themes among what people said. Be transparent about how you are using their feedback to influence your decisions. Invite your colleagues into problem-solving conversations.

In action:
Craig: I’m just going to take a moment before we start today’s agenda to highlight feedback from our last meeting. [Craig shows a slide with summarized comments and numbers next to each.] I chose five common themes from your feedback. Beside each is a number indicating how many people expressed the same sentiment. You’ll notice that people experienced our last meeting differently. Some reported that our pacing was too fast, and others thought it was just right. Let’s agree to speak up if the pace is not working for anyone and to make decisions in the moment about when we need to slow down as a group or table something so that we can return to it after people have had a chance to process.

STL recommendations:
Respond in a timely manner. If you have a significant lapse of time in between meetings, connect with any individual who has expressed on a feedback form a time-sensitive need or concern.

Implement changes. Follow-through is one of the key means to building trust. So if you say, “I heard you. I’m going to make this change based on what you said,” then go do it.

Think like a teacher:
The best way to let someone know you “heard” their feedback is not to tell them, but to make the change they suggested. We do this with students all the time. When I first taught middle school theater, I did not have a whiteboard on the wall, so I purchased a small portable one to write daily homework assignments on and leaned it against the wall at the front of the room. At the back of my classroom was a platform stage for acting. On our acting days, students would walk in to find all the desks facing the back-of-the-room platform. One day I asked students what would make the class better, expecting them to say things like “Play more drama games!,” but one boy caught me off guard and said, “Move the homework board to the back of the room on days when we are facing the platform so we don’t have to turn our heads around to copy the homework.” This simple feedback was an indication that I was viewing the room from my perspective, not that of my students. From that day forward, I moved the homework board depending on which way the students were facing.
While you and your colleagues won’t be able to make every change someone on your team suggests, when you can, do it. And when you can’t, acknowledge the suggestion and give an explanation if it will foster understanding of why the change cannot be made.

**Find the right words:**

- *In reviewing the feedback from our last meeting, I noticed many people found X helpful. Some voiced concerns about Y. Based on that, I tweaked today’s agenda.*

- *I graphed responses from the surveys and want to highlight feedback from question 2. What do you think our next steps should be in order to address this?*

- *You’ll notice that we are doing things differently today. This is because of the feedback I received from our last meeting.*

- *I appreciate the suggestion however, given X, we can’t do that at this time.*