

Feedback Culture: Scientific Foundations and Organizational Impact

Introduction

In a modern organization like Energinet (the Danish TSO), fostering a strong performance culture is a strategic priority ¹. Achieving high performance, however, must go hand-in-hand with maintaining employee well-being and psychological safety. One key lever to balance these goals is cultivating a **feedback culture** – an environment where giving and receiving feedback is a natural, continuous process. This report explores the scientific theory behind feedback culture and examines how it can drive organizational performance while supporting a healthy work climate. We draw on research in organizational psychology and real-world best practices to detail the benefits, potential pitfalls, and implementation strategies for a robust feedback culture.

What Is Feedback Culture?

A **feedback culture** is an organizational environment in which individuals feel **free, safe, and encouraged** to share and receive feedback regularly ². In such a culture, honest conversations about performance, behavior, and results flow naturally across all levels of the company ³ ⁴. Feedback is not limited to formal reviews or top-down critiques; it can be peer-to-peer, bottom-up (employees to leaders), or about processes and ideas. The hallmark of a healthy feedback culture is **psychological safety** – people can voice observations or concerns without fear of punishment or ridicule ². This means feedback (both positive and constructive) is shared openly in the spirit of learning and improvement, not blame.

Importantly, a functional feedback culture **strikes a balance**. It's neither a constant stream of unchecked criticism nor superficial niceties. Organizations must set **clear norms and boundaries** for respectful, constructive dialogue ⁵. For example, employees shouldn't be "recklessly criticizing one another without consideration," but they also shouldn't shy away from necessary constructive comments ⁵. Feedback should be focused on behaviors and results – things people can change – rather than personal attacks. Moreover, feedback culture isn't built overnight by sporadic comments; it requires **consistent, ongoing effort** and integration into daily work life ⁶. When established well, a feedback culture becomes more than a communication tool; it becomes a **competitive advantage** and a driver of continuous learning in the organization ⁷ ⁸.

Scientific Basis for Feedback Culture

The importance of feedback in organizations is backed by extensive research. Decades of studies in industrial-organizational psychology show that effective feedback is a cornerstone of performance and learning. A classic meta-analysis of feedback interventions found that, on average, feedback **improves performance** – but it also warned that feedback can sometimes *hurt* performance if done poorly ⁹. In about one-third of cases analyzed, feedback actually made performance worse, indicating that **how** feedback is delivered is critical ¹⁰. If feedback threatens an individual's self-esteem or is not constructive, it may provoke defensiveness and reduce effectiveness. This underscores that a successful

feedback culture must emphasize *skillful* feedback delivery (clear, specific, and focused on behavior or outcomes) and a *supportive context* for receiving feedback.

Researchers Manuel London and James Smither (2002) introduced a model viewing feedback as part of a continuous **performance management process**, involving both individual and environmental factors ¹¹. They defined *feedback orientation* as an individual's willingness to seek out and use feedback, and *feedback culture* as the collective norms supporting feedback in the workplace ¹¹. Their review concluded that a strong feedback orientation among employees contributes to a positive feedback culture and, in turn, better performance over time ¹². In other words, when people *value* feedback and see it as an opportunity (rather than a threat), organizations reap greater benefits. Subsequent studies have corroborated that employees high in feedback orientation tend to handle feedback more constructively and adapt their behavior effectively, which is "crucial in learning-oriented organizations" ¹³ ¹⁴. This scientific insight suggests that developing employees' *competence and mindset* around feedback (e.g. viewing feedback as useful information for growth) is a key building block of a feedback culture.

Large-scale industry data also highlight the impact of feedback on organizational outcomes. For example, a Gallup study of over 65,000 employees found that those who **received regular, meaningful feedback** had turnover rates nearly 15% lower than those who received no feedback ¹⁵. In the same analysis, 85% of employees were found to take more initiative when they felt they were receiving feedback on their work ¹⁵. These findings indicate that feedback-rich environments tend to have more engaged, proactive employees and better retention. Feedback essentially signals to employees that their contributions matter and that the organization is invested in their development ¹⁶. This aligns with employee engagement research: a recent survey showed 43% of highly engaged employees receive feedback at least weekly, versus only 18% of those with low engagement ¹⁷. Regular feedback fuels a sense of progress and recognition.

Another crucial theoretical linkage is between **feedback culture and psychological safety**. Harvard Professor Amy Edmondson's work defines *psychological safety* as a climate where people feel safe to speak up with ideas, questions, and mistakes ¹⁸. Psychological safety has been identified as the top factor in high-performing teams (notably in Google's Project Aristotle study) ¹⁹. It turns out that safety and feedback go hand-in-hand: "*Teams that feel psychologically safe are more likely to give and receive candid, respectful feedback,*" and conversely, building a stronger feedback culture requires a foundation of psychological safety ²⁰. Employees simply won't voice honest feedback if they fear negative repercussions. Experts often advise organizations to gauge and improve psychological safety as a **starting point** to implementing a feedback culture ²⁰. In practice, this means leadership must encourage input, reward honesty, and *not* punish people for speaking up. When that belief – that one won't be humiliated or penalized for honesty – is in place ¹⁸ ²¹, feedback can flow much more freely. The concept of "**Radical Candor**" by Kim Scott similarly builds on this: leaders should "*challenge directly*" while "*caring personally*," creating an atmosphere where frank feedback is seen as an act of caring and everyone is safe enough to tell the truth ²² ²³. In sum, science suggests that a feedback culture will thrive only in tandem with trust and safety in the team. Feedback and psychological safety create a virtuous cycle: safety enables honest feedback, which – when handled well – further reinforces trust.

Benefits of a Feedback Culture

When an organization successfully establishes a healthy feedback culture, numerous **advantages** emerge:

- **Higher Employee Engagement and Motivation:** Regular feedback makes employees feel noticed and valued, which boosts engagement ²⁴ ²⁵ . Employees who get frequent input (praise or constructive) develop greater ownership of their work and are more invested in the organization's success ¹⁶ ²⁶ . Feedback also fulfills the basic human need for recognition – for instance, *78% of employees say being recognized motivates them in their job* ²⁷ . Even constructive feedback can motivate, by clarifying goals and showing that the organization cares enough to help the employee improve.
- **Improved Performance and Continuous Learning:** A feedback-rich culture enables quick identification of areas for improvement, leading to faster learning and skill development ²⁸ . Instead of waiting for annual reviews, teams address issues in real-time, so individuals and processes can adjust promptly. Over time this contributes to higher overall performance. Research shows that teams that embrace both **praise and constructive criticism** appropriately are often top performers – one study noted high-performing teams give **approximately 6 positive comments for every 1 critique** on average ²⁹ . This balanced feedback ratio helps maintain morale while driving excellence. In essence, continuous feedback creates a **learning organization** that adapts and improves constantly.
- **Stronger Collaboration and Trust:** Open dialogue fostered by feedback builds **trust** among colleagues and between employees and leaders ³⁰ ²⁴ . When people routinely communicate honestly – sharing both successes and concerns – it reduces suspicion and misunderstandings. Coworkers come to know that they will hear the truth from each other (delivered respectfully) rather than harbor unspoken frustrations. This transparency strengthens relationships. Harvard Business Review reports that employees in high-trust organizations have 74% less stress and 50% higher productivity on average ³¹ . A culture of feedback, done right, contributes to such high-trust environments by eliminating “blame games” and encouraging mutual respect ³¹ .
- **Greater Innovation and Agility:** When feedback is normalized, employees feel safe to share new ideas and surface problems early, which fuels innovation ⁸ . Teams with open feedback channels can iterate and experiment more freely, as they discuss what's working and what isn't. Also, by continually gathering input, organizations can **adapt more quickly** to change ³² . For example, if a process or project is veering off course, a feedback-friendly team will speak up and course-correct instead of staying silent. This adaptability is especially valuable in fast-changing industries. In short, feedback culture makes organizations more **agile and resilient** in the face of new challenges ³² .
- **Enhanced Employee Development and Career Growth:** In a feedback culture, every employee gets regular coaching in the flow of work. This helps individuals understand their strengths and weaknesses better. Over time, employees in such cultures tend to develop faster. They actively seek feedback to improve – embodying a **growth mindset** where they view abilities as improvable with effort and input ³³ ³⁴ . Embracing what psychologist Carol Dweck calls a growth mindset means people see feedback not as a judgment of fixed talent, but as useful information to help them get better ³³ . Organizations benefit by building a more skilled, adaptable workforce.

- **Better Alignment and Results:** Continuous feedback keeps everyone aligned with goals. Employees receive guidance on how their work contributes to team objectives and where to adjust, which helps the organization meet its targets more effectively. Managers, in turn, get upward feedback that can illuminate obstacles or ideas from the front lines, leading to better-informed decision making. Over time, this creates a culture of **accountability** – people are used to discussing results and expectations openly – which propels performance and goal attainment. Enginet’s ambition to “**promote a strong performance culture**” ¹ can be greatly supported by feedback norms that ensure each employee knows how they are performing relative to expectations and how to improve continuously.

(Sources: Feedwork’s insights on feedback culture ³⁵ ³⁶ ; Thoughtexchange on engagement and trust ³⁷ ³⁸ ; Elevate Leadership/Gallup on feedback reducing turnover and boosting initiative ¹⁵ .)

Challenges and Pitfalls of Feedback Culture

While the benefits are compelling, it’s equally important to recognize potential **drawbacks and challenges** in creating a feedback culture. If implemented poorly, a “feedback culture” can backfire. Some pitfalls include:

- **Feedback Overload and Stress:** Frequent feedback, especially if mostly critical, can become **stressful** for employees ³⁹ . Not everyone is accustomed to receiving regular critique; without a supportive tone, people may feel under constant scrutiny. The *fear of criticism* may lead to anxiety and even decreased performance if employees become preoccupied with avoiding mistakes ³⁹ . Thus, moderation and balance are key – feedback should be frequent enough to be useful, but not so incessant or negative that it creates a climate of fear.
- **Lack of Psychological Safety:** A feedback culture will **fail if trust and safety are lacking**. If employees don’t truly believe that it’s safe to speak up, they will withhold honest feedback – especially toward those in power ⁴⁰ . In such cases, the culture can degrade into a one-way street of only managers critiquing subordinates. Team members with less authority may stay silent about issues or only give positive, superficial comments to avoid risk. This undermines the very purpose of a feedback culture. As one expert notes, many managers “skip the long and tedious road of creating trust... and jump directly to feedback giving,” which is a recipe for dysfunction ⁴⁰ . **Solution:** building psychological safety *first* (through trust-building, encouragement, and managers being open to feedback themselves) before expecting candid feedback from everyone.
- **Power Dynamics and Misuse of Feedback:** If leaders use “feedback” primarily as a tool to **assert power or enforce conformity**, it becomes toxic. Consultant Nada Ahmed argues that in some companies a “*rampant feedback culture*” is misused by leaders to maintain control and suppress dissent ⁴¹ ⁴² . Under the banner of “open feedback,” managers might constantly criticize ideas that don’t match their own, killing creativity and innovation ⁴¹ . In the worst case, feedback becomes a cover for personal biases or micro-management. This not only stifles diverse thinking (harming inclusion) but also teaches employees that feedback is just a top-down judgment, not a two-way growth tool. Organizations must beware of this trap and ensure feedback is given in good faith, not as a weapon.
- **Emotional Reactions and Poor Delivery:** Giving and receiving feedback are **skills** – without training, feedback exchanges can easily go wrong. Recipients may become defensive or demoralized if feedback is delivered harshly or vaguely. It’s natural for critical feedback to trigger

a fight-or-flight response; people feel attacked, as our brains often interpret criticism as a threat ⁴³. Yet, many workplaces expect employees to “just handle it” unemotionally ⁴⁴. This is unrealistic without proper coaching. On the flip side, givers of feedback might not know how to phrase feedback constructively – they might come off as blaming or overly negative. Unskilled feedback can damage relationships and reduce motivation. Indeed, the 1996 meta-analysis found that feedback sometimes *lowered* performance, largely when it threatened recipients’ self-esteem or wasn’t specific ¹⁰. **Solution:** Train team members in feedback techniques (e.g. using specific examples, focusing on behavior and impact, balancing positive and negative, etc.) ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶. Emphasize empathy and tact for feedback givers, and resilience and active listening for receivers.

- **Neglecting Positive Feedback:** Another pitfall is focusing only on errors or areas to improve. If an organization’s attempt at feedback culture devolves into constant criticism, employees will tune out or feel unappreciated. **Recognition and praise** are crucial ingredients in effective feedback cultures. Research shows the best teams reinforce good behaviors far more than they critique failures (remember the ~6:1 positive-to-negative ratio) ²⁹. Without positive feedback, morale and creativity suffer. Feedback culture should never mean “always finding fault” – it should mean *honest conversations*, including celebrating successes. A purely critical environment will simply make people afraid to take risks or speak up, the opposite of the intended effect.
- **Cultural and Individual Differences:** People vary in how they prefer to give/receive feedback. Some cultures (national or organizational) are more direct, others more indirect. Without sensitivity to these differences, a one-size-fits-all feedback approach can alienate employees. For instance, a very direct feedback style might intimidate those who are used to more tact, and a very indirect style might be lost on those used to bluntness. Similarly, individuals with low feedback orientation may initially resist or fear feedback ¹³. It takes time and supportive coaching for them to see feedback as a positive. An effective feedback culture needs to allow room for different styles and help people gradually build their feedback muscle.

In summary, the **context and execution** of feedback matter enormously. As a leadership coach put it, “Giving feedback is a skill, and like any skill, it can be learned, honed, and mastered.” ⁴⁷. Organizations must invest in developing that skill and **laying the cultural groundwork** (trust, norms, training) to avoid these pitfalls. Otherwise, a well-intentioned push for more feedback could lead to confusion or resentment rather than improvement.

Feedback Culture and Psychological Safety

Because psychological safety is so foundational, it deserves special attention in the context of feedback culture. Psychological safety, again, is the shared belief that **it’s safe to take interpersonal risks** – such as offering an honest opinion or admitting a mistake – without fear of backlash ¹⁸. A feedback culture will only flourish if employees at all levels feel this sense of safety. **Leaders have a critical role** in creating it. They must model vulnerability and openness: for example, leaders can deliberately ask their teams for feedback on their own performance or on decisions (“What could I have done differently to make this project go smoother?”) ⁴⁸ ⁴⁹. When a manager *asks* for feedback and listens without defensiveness, it sends a powerful signal that feedback is welcomed and safe. This practice, sometimes called an “ask-first” feedback approach, directly encourages psychological safety by removing uncertainty about whether it’s okay to speak up ⁵⁰. If the boss actively seeks input, even hesitant employees feel more confident that their feedback will be received positively ⁵⁰. Experts suggest building such “ask-first” rituals into regular workflows – for instance, ending meetings by asking for

feedback, or having team members routinely solicit peer feedback – to make the habit of speaking up **unavoidable** (in a positive way) and normalize it across the organization ⁵⁰ ⁵¹ .

Psychological safety also involves how feedback receivers are treated when they react. Leaders should anticipate that some candid feedback might stir emotion or disagreement – and **that's okay**. Rather than label someone who gets defensive as “not open to growth,” good leaders will coach teams through those reactions with empathy ⁵² ⁵³ . It's important to reinforce that *everyone* (including managers) can have an emotional response to feedback, and to give people space to process it constructively. By acknowledging this and working through it (instead of punishing it), managers strengthen the safety net. Additionally, setting **ground rules** for feedback conversations can help, such as: assume positive intent, keep feedback confidential when appropriate, and focus on issues not personalities. These practices ensure that even difficult feedback occurs within a respectful, trustful environment.

There is also a strong link between feedback culture, psychological safety, and **well-being**. In high-safety cultures, employees experience less stress and burnout ³¹ , as noted earlier. They feel respected and heard, which boosts mental well-being. A feedback culture contributes by giving employees a *voice* – they know they can express concerns (including about workload or conflicts) and something will be done, rather than silently suffer. Moreover, when successes are openly acknowledged through feedback, employees gain a sense of pride and belonging, further enhancing their job satisfaction. In Energinet's case, emphasizing psychological safety alongside feedback will ensure that efforts to push performance do not inadvertently create a fear-driven culture. Instead, it creates a climate of **“high performance with high care”** – where people challenge each other to excel *and* support each other's growth. This balance is key to achieving both ambitious goals and a healthy workplace.

Building an Effective Feedback Culture

Implementing a feedback culture is a **transformational change** that involves developing new competencies and habits across the organization. Here are several evidence-based strategies and best practices to successfully build and sustain a feedback culture:

- **Leadership Commitment and Role-Modeling:** Change starts at the top. Leaders and managers must *demonstrate* the feedback behaviors they wish to see. This means **actively seeking feedback** from others and showing humility. For example, a leader might regularly ask in one-on-ones, “*What's one thing I could do better to support you?*” and then genuinely thank the employee for their input. When team members see managers embracing feedback (and not retaliating or getting defensive), it sets the tone that feedback is safe and valued ⁵⁴ ²³ . Leaders should also share stories of feedback they received and how it helped them improve, to reinforce a growth mindset norm ⁵⁵ ⁵⁶ . Essentially, leaders need to **“lead by example”** in making feedback a normal, positive part of work life ⁵⁴ .
- **Training in Feedback Skills:** As noted, giving and receiving feedback are learnable skills. Investing in **training workshops** or coaching sessions can level-set expectations and equip employees with tools for constructive feedback ⁴⁵ . Such training typically covers how to structure feedback (e.g. using frameworks like SBI – Situation-Behavior-Impact), how to word difficult messages with respect, how to listen to feedback without interrupting, and how to manage emotional triggers. It should involve practice scenarios so people build confidence. By training **“feedback literacy”**, Energinet can ensure that feedback exchanges are productive rather than hurtful. This directly addresses the fear some may have – as people learn that feedback conversations, when done right, are supportive dialogues, their comfort grows. Remember, “*Giving feedback is a skill, and like any skill, it can be mastered*” with practice ⁴⁷ .

- **Normalize and Embed Feedback in Routines:** To change culture, feedback must move from being an exceptional event to a **routine habit**. Organizations can embed feedback opportunities in existing processes. For instance, incorporate brief feedback rounds after major projects or meetings (“retropectives”), encourage teams to start meetings with shout-outs for good work, or set up a system of regular one-on-ones that include mutual feedback. Some companies implement **continuous feedback tools** (internal platforms or apps where employees can give quick feedback or kudos in real-time). The idea is to make feedback part of the everyday workflow, not just annual performance reviews ⁵⁷. Feedwork, the firm engaged by Energinet, emphasizes making feedback a “*natural and continuous part of everyday work*” and not a one-time event ⁵⁸ ⁵⁹. When feedback happens frequently and informally, it feels less daunting – much like any skill practiced often. Over time, this frequency helps everyone grow more comfortable with both giving praise and discussing issues as they arise.
- **Adopt an “Ask-First” Approach:** Encourage employees at all levels to **proactively ask for feedback**, rather than waiting to be given it. This flips the dynamic to be more empowering. When someone asks “*I’d love your thoughts on how I handled that client call – any suggestions?*”, it signals openness and reduces the anxiety on both sides. Jeff Wetzler, author of *Ask for Feedback*, advocates for an “*ask-first feedback culture*” where seeking input is expected and celebrated ⁵⁰. Managers can facilitate this by creating structured prompts (e.g. at the end of a project, each team member asks at least one colleague for feedback on their contribution). By making asking for feedback a norm, you ensure that feedback is truly welcome and not seen as an unsolicited attack ⁵⁰. It also helps those who might otherwise stay quiet to voice their perceptions, since they’ve been directly invited. Over time, this builds a culture of **continuous dialogue** rather than top-down critique.
- **Balance Positive and Constructive Feedback:** Make sure to **recognize successes and give praise** generously, alongside coaching on improvements. A culture of feedback is not a culture of nitpicking; it’s about open communication *in all directions*. Celebrating what is going well is just as important as pointing out what could be better. Leaders should cultivate a habit of mentioning positives in day-to-day interactions (“I appreciate how thoroughly you prepared that report, it made decision-making easier.”). Public recognition (when appropriate) can reinforce desired behaviors and morale. This positive feedback not only motivates employees ²⁷, it also softens the ground for constructive feedback – employees are more receptive to critique when they know their strengths are seen and valued. **Constructive feedback** should be framed as “areas for growth” or “how we can get even better,” keeping the tone forward-looking and supportive ⁶⁰ ⁶¹. Feedwork’s approach similarly underscores giving feedback with *respect and care* to build trust, and seeing feedback as a two-way *dialogue* that includes recognition of success ⁶² ⁶³. By rebranding feedback as a positive, normal exchange of insights (not just negative criticism) ⁶⁴ ⁶⁵, organizations can reduce the stigma and fear around the very word “feedback.”
- **Establish Clear Feedback Guidelines:** It can help to codify what “good feedback” looks like in your organization. For example, a simple guideline could be: “*We will be kind, candid, and specific in our feedback. We focus on behaviors and impact, not personal attributes. We listen to understand, not to rebut.*” These principles, once communicated and reinforced, set a common expectation. They can be included in manager training, new employee onboarding, and team charters. Some companies create a **feedback framework** or even a checklist that employees use when preparing to give feedback, ensuring consistency. Having an agreed definition of respectful feedback also empowers employees at all levels to call out any feedback that crosses into disrespect or bias, thus maintaining psychological safety.

- **Iterative and Supported Change:** Building a feedback culture is a journey. It's wise to monitor progress and adjust. Use **employee surveys or pulse checks** to ask people if they feel more comfortable giving feedback, if they are receiving enough feedback, and if the feedback is helpful. This data can highlight pockets where culture isn't changing and more support is needed (e.g. maybe a certain department needs additional training or a manager isn't embracing the new norms). Additionally, providing coaching or follow-up sessions helps to sustain the momentum. External partners like Feedwork often assist not just with initial workshops but with long-term embedding of habits ⁶⁶ ⁶⁷. They recommend sustained commitment – possibly a longer learning journey – to ensure feedback becomes “embedded in your organisation's DNA” ⁶⁶. Energinet's engagement of Feedwork for multiple sessions is a positive step in this sustained approach. Keep in mind that cultural change requires **reinforcement**: celebrate early wins (e.g. share a success story of how feedback solved a problem or improved performance), and openly acknowledge that it's a learning process for everyone. With leadership backing and patience, the change will take hold.

Conclusion

Developing a strong feedback culture is a powerful way to steer an organization toward its performance goals while also nurturing a positive, inclusive climate. The scientific evidence is clear that when people regularly exchange feedback in a constructive manner, it drives higher engagement, learning, and agility – all ingredients of a high-performance organization ¹⁵ ⁸. Energinet's strategy calls for a “strong performance culture” ¹, and feedback is the engine that can help achieve this by aligning everyone on continuous improvement and accountability. At the same time, by rooting feedback practices in trust and **psychological safety**, the company can ensure that higher performance does not come at the expense of employee well-being. In fact, a well-implemented feedback culture enhances well-being – people feel heard, supported in their growth, and more connected as a team ³⁰ ³¹.

To realize these benefits, Energinet should leverage the expertise of Feedwork and the principles outlined in this report: **train the necessary competencies**, encourage leaders to model vulnerability and ask for feedback, promote an ask-first mindset among employees, and maintain a healthy balance of praise and constructive input. When feedback becomes a natural, welcomed part of daily work, the organization gains a **learning advantage** that can propel both performance and innovation. Perhaps most importantly, such a culture fosters an environment of “**good tension**” – where people challenge each other to excel, but do so with respect and mutual care. This leads to a workplace where goals are met or exceeded *and* employees thrive with high morale and psychological safety.

In summary, a feedback culture – grounded in scientific understanding and thoughtful practice – can be transformative. It turns feedback from a source of fear or formality into a continuous dialogue for growth. For Energinet, embracing this culture shift offers a path to strengthening execution and customer focus (as per Strategi 2025) through empowered, engaged employees ¹. With careful attention to the advantages and pitfalls discussed, the organization can use feedback culture as a lever to drive performance **and** cultivate an atmosphere of trust, inclusion, and resilience. This dual payoff of **better results and better well-being** makes feedback culture a worthwhile investment in the company's future success.

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