Building a developmental culture of feedback

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Abstract
Purpose – This paper draws from more than 25 years of research with aspiring and practicing educational leaders to present six strategies for building a culture of feedback in schools, teams, districts, professional learning opportunities, and other educational settings. These strategies reflect key elements of the authors’ new, developmental approach to feedback. The paper aims to discuss these issues.
Design/methodology/approach – Through the lens of adult developmental theory, the authors highlight foundational learnings from open-ended survey research with 14 educational leaders about their experiences giving and receiving feedback, and prior qualitative, mixed-method, and longitudinal research with principals, assistant principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educational leaders.
Findings – The authors share six developmentally oriented strategies for establishing trust and building conditions for authentic, generative feedback: finding value in mistakes, modeling vulnerability, caring for the (inter)personal, clarifying expectations, sharing developmental ideas, and building an infrastructure for collaboration.
Practical implications – This work has implications for leadership and leadership preparation, especially given contemporary emphases on collaboration and high-stakes evaluations as tools for ongoing improvement, enhancing professional capital, and internal, individual, and system-wide capacity building.
Originality/value – Because a developmental perspective has been noticeably missing from the wider feedback literature and leadership preparation curricula, this work extends and enhances tenets from different fields (e.g. business, developmental psychology, educational leadership and educational leadership preparation), while also addressing urgent calls for educational reform; leadership preparation, development, and practice; and professional capital building.
Keywords Trust, Leadership, Culture, Feedback, Adult development, Individual and organizational capacity building

At every level of the system, educators are working to generate new solutions to complex challenges, address pressing issues of equity and diversity, and better support students’ well-being and academic achievement. Educational leaders, in particular, have been tasked with leading change with and for students and communities, supporting the diverse adults in their care, and growing their own leadership (Bogotch and Shields, 2014; Grogan, 2013; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Khalifa et al., 2016). Within this contemporary milieu, professional feedback has emerged as a key lever for school improvement – and for building professional capital and internal capacity (Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016; MacDonald, 2011; Marshall, 2013; Stone and Heen, 2014). Likewise, policy and cultural shifts toward professional learning and collaboration permeate our “new normal” world, and underscore the critical importance of effective communication (Davis, 2009; DuFour and Marzano, 2011; Gates, 2013; Goddard et al., 2007; Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2017; Leithwood and Louis, 2012; Ronfeldt et al., 2015).

Yet, the mixed results of current reforms (e.g. Hallinger et al., 2014) beg the question: when, where, and how do educational leaders (broadly defined) learn to give feedback and support meaningful growth and collaboration in teams, schools, professional learning communities (PLCs), and performance evaluations? While this is essential in general, adult developmental theory shines an important light on the fact that educators – regardless of their roles in schools
and systems – will make sense of feedback and relationships in qualitatively different ways. This is also a sentiment echoed by the adult leaders in our university classes, workshops, research, and professional learning initiatives, who regularly name feedback as one of their biggest challenges and hopes for learning. Accordingly, this paper presents aspects of a new, developmental approach to feedback, called feedback for growth (by “growth” we mean the expansion of our internal capacities to better manage the complexities of learning, teaching, leading, and living, Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016). Drawing from Robert Kegan’s (1982, 1994, 2000) constructive developmental theory and more than 25 years of research and work with school leaders around the globe that extends the original theory (Drago-Severson, 1996, 2004a,b, 2009, 2012, 2016; Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016, 2018; Drago-Severson et al., 2013; Drago-Severson et al., 2015), the paper offers a close up look at a developmental approach to feedback and how it can make a difference.

Specifically, it emphasizes the promise of preparing leaders to build an effective, growth-enhancing culture of feedback in schools and organizations, and shares six developmentally oriented strategies for establishing trust and building conditions for authentic, generative feedback. Promisingly, we have discovered in our work, research, and teaching that this kind of genuine, authentic communication and collaboration is one of the most powerful ways we can help each other grow, improve instructional and leadership practices, examine assumptions, raise collective consciousness, and build professional and internal capacity. Below we share more about our theoretical framework, research base, and findings.

Theoretical framework
This paper is informed by two main bodies of literature: current feedback challenges in education, and constructive-developmental theory. As mentioned, and as we will describe in greater detail in our discussion of our research base, it is also informed by our longitudinal research and experiences supporting adult development in universities and K-12 professional learning initiatives.

Feedback challenges in education
Feedback is one of the primary ways we can support others’ development and grow the internal capacities needed to meet the complex demands of our educational world. Yet, throughout the education sector, there remains a growing sense that teachers and leaders need to do something different in terms of feedback, not just something more. While the field seems to be experiencing a proliferation of feedback – from supervisors, mentors, coaches, colleagues, parents, students, and performance reports; and via initiatives such as 360-degree feedback, S.M.A.R.T. goals, the Danielson framework, instructional “rounds” and learning walks, and nation-wide changes to teacher evaluation systems (Boudett et al., 2005; Danielson, 2010/2011) – the growing amount of feedback on our plates can feel overwhelming if we don’t have a clear plan for prioritizing and taking it in. It may come as no surprise, then, that research is beginning to suggest that many educators may be getting too much feedback, as feedback from different supervisors, colleagues, stakeholders, and assessment measures may be inconsistent or even conflicting (Lavigne and Good, 2013; Marshall, 2013). This can be especially challenging for educators already working as hard as they can, and who report that such an influx of feedback does not translate readily into improved performance (Kegan and Lahey, 2016; Weisberg et al., 2009).

For many other educators, however, a lack of quality feedback creates a different kind of challenge. By way of example, a recent study of twelve large, US districts found that 74 percent of teachers reported receiving virtually no feedback on their summative evaluations (Weisberg et al., 2009). Other research has found that formal feedback for
Constructive-developmental theory

Drawing from more than 45 years of research about how people learn, make sense of their experiences, and develop across the lifespan (e.g., Drago-Severson, 2004a, b, 2009, 2012, 2016; Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000; Basseches, 1984; Baxter-Magolda, 2009; Belenky et al., 1997; Kegan and Lahey, 2009, 2016; Kohlberg, 1969, 1984; Perry, 1970; Piaget, 1952), constructive developmental theory posits that growth in adulthood occurs in qualitatively different stages—ways of knowing. More specifically, constructive developmental theory identifies four qualitatively different ways of knowing more common in adulthood: the instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self-transforming. While each way of knowing has both strengths and limitations, and no one way of knowing is “better” than another, they do occur in a particular, sequential order, with a move from one way of knowing to the next reflecting a holistic and sequential expansion of our cognitive, affective, intrapersonal, and interpersonal capacities (Drago-Severson, 2004a, b, 2009, 2012, 2016). Put more simply, a developmental lens highlights the fact that adults will orient to and prioritize different things in their feedback and collaboration, such as meeting concrete needs (instrumental knowers), the expectations of valued others (socializing knowers), their own ideals and judgments (self-authoring knowers), or interconnection and mutuality (self-transforming knowers).

We often describe adults’ ways of knowing as the lenses—or filters—through which they interpret their worlds, as they fundamentally influence how we make sense of our experiences, professional commitments, and relationships. In the context of education, for example, our ways of knowing shape how we understand our roles and responsibilities as learners, teachers, leaders, administrators, collaborators—and more. They also influence our expectations about what makes a good principal, superintendent, director, head teacher, coach, professional learning leader, or colleague. In terms of feedback more specifically, it can also be helpful to think about our ways of knowing as the audio frequencies with which we hear (Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016). In other words, our ways of knowing predispose us to feedback styles we can tune into—and those we may inadvertently tune out. Accordingly, understanding ways of knowing can help us learn even more about how to create and sustain cultures of genuine communication with and for adults who will need different kinds of supports and holding (in the psychological sense).

Toward this end, Table I provides an overview of orienting concerns and developmental supports and challenges for adults who make meaning with the instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self-transforming ways of knowing.

Importantly, a person’s way of knowing is not random. Rather, it is a stable and consistent system of meaning making employed across contexts for a period of time. In fact, when we are “in” a way of knowing, it generally feels more like a part of who we are than something we have (Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016). In other words, our ways of knowing predispose us to feedback styles we can tune into—and those we may inadvertently tune out. Accordingly, understanding ways of knowing can help us learn even more about how to create and sustain cultures of genuine communication with and for adults who will need different kinds of supports and holding (in the psychological sense).

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<th>Way of knowing</th>
<th>Preoccupying concerns</th>
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<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>Orients to and is run by own self-interests, purposes, and concrete needs. Is most concerned with tangible consequences of own and others’ actions. Makes decisions based on what the self will acquire and on following the rules. Experiences other people as either helpers or obstacles to meeting one’s own concrete needs. Does not yet have the capacity for abstract thinking in the psychological sense, or for making generalizations from one context to another.</td>
<td>Supports Concrete models, samples, suggestions, rubrics, protocols, and examples (e.g. findings from research that prove the effectiveness of initiatives; exemplary lesson plans and best practices; clear directives about processes, goals, or next steps). Discussions about what went right and wrong. Timelines with clear steps and deliverables. Challenges Managing leadership or teaching challenges that do not have a clear answer or solution. Making abstract connections. Seeing things from another’s point of view. Looking beyond own understandings of the “right” thing to do and how things “are” (or are “supposed” to be).</td>
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<td>Socializing</td>
<td>Can take perspective on own needs, wants, and desires, but is “run” by (and therefore cannot reflect on or control) the expectations, values, and opinions of valued others (e.g. external authorities, loved ones, or society). Adopts others’ standards, values, and judgments. Orients to internal world and inner states (feelings). Feels responsible for others’ feelings and holds others responsible for one’s own</td>
<td>Supports Demonstrations of appreciation. Affirmation of what’s going well (e.g. hard work, effort, progress). Recognition of growth and contributions. Feeling accepted as a person and a colleague. Challenges Sharing thoughts and feelings in a larger group, or when unsure of others’ ideas. Taking in critical feedback without feeling torn apart. Engaging in difficult conversations with valued others or supervisors. Turning toward conflict and high-risk situations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-authoring</td>
<td>Orients to self’s values (internal authority) and the smooth running of own internal system. Can take perspective on relationships, mutuality. Evaluates criticism according to internal standards. Is ultimately concerned with own competence and performance. Can balance contradictory feelings simultaneously. Views conflict as a natural part of life, work, and leadership.</td>
<td>Supports Autonomy and self-direction in goal setting and professional practice. Leadership roles. Recognition of competence and expertise. Opportunities to offer feedback and ideas to others. Challenges Considering and finding value in ideas and viewpoints that feel diametrically opposed to one’s own. Critically examining own carefully curated values, beliefs, and philosophies about teaching, leadership, and the world. Sharing leadership and/or authority with others.</td>
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Table I. Ways of knowing: preoccupying concerns and supports and challenges for growth (continued)
identities will influence our experiences in vital ways (as well as the supports and challenges we encounter in our lives) (Kegan et al., 2001).

It is also important to note that research suggests adults need – and are gradually developing – more inclusive, higher order capacities as a result of the increasing demands of leadership, education, and the world more broadly (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012; Kegan and Lahey, 2009, 2016). While meta-analyses of dissertations and other studies indicate that the socializing way of knowing remains the most common in adulthood (Kegan, 1994, 2000; Kegan and Lahey, 2009, 2016), current estimates posit that approximately 8-11 percent of adults in the USA now make meaning with at least some degree of self-transforming capacity (up from only 3-5 percent in 1994) (Kegan, 2013). As this paper posits, feedback is one important way we can support each other in our efforts to grow – and to see more deeply into ourselves, others, and the urgent complexities of our schools and systems. Echoing Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), we argue that when we grow ourselves as individuals, we are better equipped to engage in and contribute to the collective processes that maximize teaching, leading, and learning – and foster real change. In other words, when we build internal capacity (i.e. move from one way of knowing to the next), we have more resources to draw from, and are better equipped to manage the complexity and ambiguity of contemporary education. Promisingly, feedback is one key way we can help each other develop – just as understanding adult development can help us give better feedback.

**Research base**

While in many ways a practice-oriented, conceptual paper, this paper also draws from a rich data pool, including in-depth (open-ended) survey research with 14 educational leaders about their experiences giving and receiving feedback, and more than 25 years of research (i.e., surveys, interviews, and evaluations) and work with school leaders around the world. Below, we describe our methods of data collection and analysis, as well as some limitations and possible extensions.

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<th>Way of knowing</th>
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<tr>
<td>Self-transforming</td>
<td>- Orients to multiple self-systems, inter-individuality</td>
<td>- Supports</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Is substantively less invested in own identity and more open to others’ perspectives; can take perspective on own agency, ideology</td>
<td>- Mutual, collaborative conversations</td>
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<td>- Wants to grow and improve different aspects of self; engages constantly in process of discernment about self</td>
<td>- Open-ended opportunities for connection and reflection</td>
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<td>- Is able to understand and manage tremendous complexity and ambiguity</td>
<td>- Time to listen to and discuss multiple viewpoints and ideas</td>
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<td>- Constantly judges and questions how self-system works and seeks to improve it</td>
<td>- Exploring paradoxes, internal and systemic inconsistencies, and different alternatives</td>
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<td>- Managing the challenges inherent to making meaning in a way that is often different than colleagues'</td>
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<td>- Balancing the desire for interconnection and collaboration with the fast pace of education and traditional understandings of leadership</td>
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<td>- Managing the often times slower pace of change and individual/organizational capacity building</td>
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Table I. *Source: Adapted from Drago-Severson (2009) and Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2018)*
Data collection
To help ground our ongoing exploration of feedback in the stories, examples, and reflections of on-the-ground educators, we invited 14 educational leaders in different roles (e.g. principals, assistant principals, superintendents, teacher leaders, educational consultants, university professors) – who we knew through various channels as teachers or colleagues to be generally effective at giving feedback – to reflect in writing about their feedback experiences. We asked, for example, about what they saw as the overall goals of feedback, their preferences and strategies for giving and receiving feedback, and the most important elements of feedback (from their perspective). As we say more about in our discussion of data analysis, these survey responses served to help concretize preliminary themes, and triangulate learnings from prior stages of our research. It is also important to note that, while we did have prior relationships with survey respondents, we were not currently supervising or teaching any of the participants at the time the survey was conducted, and participation was completely voluntary. In fact, in most cases where survey respondents were former students, many years had passed since the conclusion of the academic relationship (in one case, a current student of the first author with vast leadership experience learned about the survey and volunteered to contribute).

In addition to the open-ended survey data, this paper also draws from and extends qualitative findings about how 25 principals across the USA supported teachers’ learning and development within their schools (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012), and builds on an earlier, four-and-a-half-year ethnography (Drago-Severson, 1996) that investigated how one principal exercised leadership on behalf of teacher development. Since 2009, we have also conducted mixed-methods (survey) research with principals, assistant principals, teachers, superintendents, and other school leaders in the workshops, institutes, and classes we teach, and conducted a longitudinal, mixed-methods study (surveys \[ n = 40 \]; in-depth interviews \[ n = 20 \]) exploring how graduate students who took these classes went on to use developmental ideas and practices in their work years later (Drago-Severson et al., 2013).

In each phase as applicable, we took careful steps to attend to the potential validity threats associated with conducting research with participants with whom we had prior relationships (i.e. to acknowledge and attend to the power dynamics of working with, in some cases, former students). For example, in the longitudinal study with former graduate students, interviews were completely voluntary, and were conducted after grades were submitted, and by a member of the research team who was not the lead instructor of the focal courses. That said, we recognize – and hope – that these and other prior relationships may have enhanced the data in important ways, too, as participants may have felt more comfortable sharing their thinking, successes, challenges, and experiences.

Data analysis
To develop our new approach to feedback, our team engaged in several phases of intensive data analysis, where we carefully explored and documented leaders’ experiences with feedback, and tracked what worked to support adult development (in participants’ practice and our own). The processes involved inductive and theoretical coding (Maxwell, 2013) of the feedback surveys (as the initial entry point into our guiding research question) – as well as the notes, feedback, and data from our university classes, professional development institutes, and prior surveys and interviews. We worked collaboratively to look across these different sets of data and experiences to develop, synthesize, and crosscheck codes (e.g. feedback support, feedback challenge, feedback purpose, feedback culture, developmental dimension, effective practice, etc.) (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

We met regularly to discuss emerging ideas and to collectively develop themes and practical strategies in relation to our data, coding, experience, and theoretical framework (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2013). Specifically, we sought to highlight representative and illustrative examples in...
our data (e.g. strategies leaders employed to build and sustain trust, relationships, and positive learning cultures) as well as typical cases that reflected common experiences shared by participants with each of the different ways of knowing (in their own work contexts and in relation to any professional learning experiences we had the honor of facilitating). Throughout this process, we attended to descriptive, interpretive and theoretical validity by: drawing from participants’ verbatim quotes, examining data for confirming and disconfirming instances of themes (Miles et al., 2013) (e.g. exploring multiple ways that adults who make meaning with a particular way of knowing orient to feedback as both givers and receivers; actively seeking out examples of contrary feelings about a particular practice or strategy), and engaging in regular interpretive meetings to conduct an in-depth, cross-comparative analysis of data, and to engage in cross checking codes and interpretations (Maxwell, 2013). In all phases, we employed a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2015) while incorporating various literatures (e.g. about feedback and adult development) into analysis. More specifically, the findings below— which encapsulate key learnings from across the larger scope of our ongoing inquiry—were developed in light of the following research question:

**RQ1.** How might a developmental lens offer new insights for creating a culture of feedback—particularly one that supports adults with diverse ways of knowing?

This question was part of a larger set of questions used to explore the potential connection between constructive-developmental theory and feedback when elucidating our developmental approach.

**Limitations**

In addition to the complexities of learning, in some cases, from participants we knew previously, we also acknowledge the limitations of drawing largely from survey and interview data as self-reported descriptions. While data collection for this phase of our research did not include formal observations of educators giving and/or receiving feedback, learning from participants through surveys and interviews allowed us to learn from a geographically diverse sample, and to also focus on the meaning making underlying participants’ understandings of feedback as a first step into this inquiry. We also worked, during our analytic process, to triangulate emerging themes and learnings with lessons and observations from our ongoing, on-the-ground work with educators in K-12 schools, as well as our own teaching and feedback practice. For future research, we recommend coupling interview and survey data with field observations and formal developmental assessments to add new nuance and depth to findings.

**Building a culture of feedback**

This section highlights key lessons synthesized from our research and practice, including strategies for building a culture of feedback. This is essential because, as many educators have shared with us, meaningful, effective feedback is largely dependent on the context in which it is offered. When, for example, “real” feedback falls outside of organizational norms, educators share that it can be hard to offer one’s authentic thinking with colleagues and directors, for fear of retribution or “rocking the boat.” In a similar way, when feedback is presented or shared in ways that heighten anxiety (or feel like “gotcha moments,” as many participants described), it can be hard to reframe feedback as a tool for growth, or an expression of trust and respect. As one principal from our survey research explained (and this is a common sentiment leaders voice):

most feedback to which we’re initially introduced is negative: parents/teachers/coaches/directors telling us what we did wrong, police telling us we broke the law, employers telling us we will be fired […]. These are not great introductions to feedback.
Fortunately, there are things that leaders across all levels can do to strengthen what we see as the essential preconditions of trust, safety, and respect (Drago-Severson et al., 2013), and to build what we refer to as a culture of feedback. As our research and work reveal, attending to these vital, affective dimensions before, during, and after feedback can help shape one-on-one relationships, teams, schools, and districts as growth-enhancing contexts. For example, our research illuminates that employing and embodying six strategies over time can help leaders alleviate worry, instill a sense of confidence and security, and contribute to a shared understanding of and purpose for feedback – for adults with all ways of knowing (Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016). We discuss each of these in the sections that follow, and weave in parallel learnings from the wider literature to complement key points:

- recognizing the value of mistakes;
- modeling vulnerability and a learning stance;
- honoring the (inter)personal;
- making expectations clear – from both sides;
- sharing developmental theory and practices; and
- employing and strengthening collaborative structures.

While these strategies are not mutually exclusive (and, in fact, are connected by a developmental through-line), we tease them apart here to help shine a light on key feedback “moves” that participants in our research – and we – have found very effective over time. We also describe how these strategies can be employed and differentiated to support adults across the developmental continuum.

**Recognizing the value of mistakes**

Often, adults in our research equated “being professional” with putting their best foot forward, demonstrating competency and success, and proving their worth to supervisors and stakeholders. Adults in leadership roles, too – such as principals, assistant principals, superintendents, coaches, and team leaders – confided feeling like they needed to “have all the answers” and hide any signs of weakness. Yet, as our research (and others’) suggests, acknowledging our growing edges and vulnerabilities can actually help us understand and address them – and continue our developmental journeys of learning and growing (e.g. Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski, 2002; Brown, 2012; Kegan and Lahey, 2016). Just as safely acknowledging errors in student work can lead to the richest academic performance (Hattie, 2012b), addressing mistakes and missteps in adults’ practice (and our own) – in supportive, developmental ways – can also foster deep learning and change.

For example, in the for profit sector, Kegan et al. (2014) have highlighted the promise of a new kind of company, called deliberately developmental organizations, which prioritize the fact that adults are “still valuable even as they are screwing up – potentially even more valuable, if they can overcome the limitations they are exposing” (p. 6). Like children and youth, adults need opportunities to experiment, learn from mistakes, and experience growth as a process (rather than a product or demand). While formal evaluations – like capstone projects and summative ratings – play a very important role in teacher feedback (and while everyone will of course want to do their best on these “permanent record” kinds of measures), creating opportunities for ongoing formative feedback – vertically, between supervisors and supervisees, and horizontally, between colleagues – can help create a context in which asking for help is a sign of strength and self-awareness, and a powerful, collaborative norm.

Understanding ways of knowing and developmental diversity can also help leaders (broadly defined) adopt this kind of learning-oriented stance in relation to feedback.
For example, leaders could: help instrumental knowers understand that valuing mistakes is the “right” thing to do according to research (and that it will be valued and rewarded professionally), assure socializing knowers that mistakes are a natural part of growth, and that they will still be valued, liked, and respected if they share the “rough spots” of their practice and thinking, invite self-authoring knowers to assess their own areas for growth and look, as well, toward larger, school-wide needs and challenges, and engage self-transforming knowers as partners in learning, collaboration, and feedback. Meeting adults where they are in these ways can – as one seasoned principal representatively explained in one of our institutes – “help new ideas get absorbed and soaked in.”

Modeling vulnerability and a learning stance

Powerfully, one of the most effective ways to demonstrate the value of learning as a process – and of mistakes as steps toward growth – is to model these commitments in one’s own actions and behaviors. While leading with this kind of vulnerability takes both courage and practice, aligning your “audio” with your “visuals” – and looking within just as without – can set a powerful example for others. Indeed, acknowledging that you do not have all the answers (as either a feedback giver or receiver), seeking out and learning from feedback on your practice and leadership, and being transparent about your own growing edges can all help foster a more genuine culture of feedback over time – and deepen colleagues’ essential feelings of trust, safety, and respect in relation to sharing their own needs for growth.

Yet, as a developmental lens helps make clear, educators – and all adults, for that matter – will orient differently to expressing vulnerability, and to modeling it in their leadership. What, for example, might it feel like for an instrumental knower to share his or her growing edge, when an orienting concern is getting it “right”? What might be at risk for a socializing knower asked to share a problem of practice or classroom challenge with a valued colleague or evaluator? How might it be hard for a self-authoring knower to relinquish the allure of personal mastery or competence, when it’s so closely aligned with personal identity? To be sure, modeling vulnerability requires complex internal capacities, as well as a leadership stance that reaches beyond traditional, managerial approaches (Drago-Severson, 2012; Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2018; Petrie, 2014; Shoho et al., 2010).

Despite the internal and external challenges of being vulnerable and modeling vulnerability, our research suggests that this promising practice can be more fully embodied over time. Like building a muscle, it takes both time and practice. Moreover, we have found that when leaders model vulnerability and a commitment to self-development, more people are willing to acknowledge the parts of themselves that are still developing – and to recognize that we all have these. Ultimately, disguising, hiding, or ignoring our growing edges – whether personal, professional, developmental, or organizational – only gives them more weight in our lives, so creating contexts in which we can share these more tender parts of ourselves is really a gift we can give to one another.

Honoring the (inter)personal

Genuinely caring for and about the ways colleagues’ internal capacities and life circumstances influence their performance can make a tremendous difference in how feedback is received, and can help leaders differentiate their feedback so others can hear. Importantly, this kind of individualized and personal care is a principle many educators in our research describe embracing readily for children and youth, yet unintentionally overlooking when working with adults. While, as you know, adults’ developmental capacities will likely influence how they orient to interpersonal connections (e.g. as a means to an end, as the foundation of one’s sense of self, as an affirmation of their competence, or as a context for mutuality), the fact is – at the end of the day – most everyone likes to be liked and to feel cared for. Understanding more, then, about what feels supportive and matters
most to the individuals in your care (be it developmentally, culturally, or simply personally) can help create a safe and supportive context for both collaboration and feedback.

Knowing that many leaders we’ve worked with and learned from lament the slippery slope of “supervising friends” (as they call it), it’s vital to emphasize here that this strategy of caring for the (inter)personal isn’t about friendships, per se, but about relationships more holistically. It’s about caring for and learning ever more about who colleagues are – as teachers, leaders, individuals, community members, and growing individuals. And, it’s about approaching conversations and feedback as opportunities to deepen knowledge of and care for one another over time. As one principal recently explained, feedback works best in her school when she offers it “to the whole of the teacher, not just to the teacher parts of them.” Ultimately, caring for the (inter)personal in these ways is about grounding the work in the preconditions of trust, safety, and respect – for when people feel known, supported, seen, and heard, real feedback can flourish as an expectation rather than an exception. It can also help you integrate developmental feedback into the more holistic fabric of ongoing relationships, so that it feels purposeful and built-in, rather than tangential (Fullan, 2014).

Checking in and out. One practice that we have found to be very helpful in building trust and relationships in one-on-one and group contexts is checking in and out (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012; Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016). Put most simply, setting aside time at the beginning and end of meetings for individuals to share (if they’d like to) something that feels important in that moment (i.e. personally, professionally, or both) can help deepen connections and interpersonal understandings that serve as the foundation for meaningful feedback and collaboration. Thus, checking in and out is a flexible and promising practice you can employ with emerging and established groups, and with individuals who make meaning with any way of knowing.

Likewise, it can be helpful to think about how check-ins can be employed and adapted for both new and established teams/relationships. For newer or emerging groups, for instance, it can be helpful to check in around getting-to-know-you topics like weekend or vacation plans, special occasions (e.g. birthdays or anniversaries), or important day-to-day occurrences that feel pressing or pertinent. Learning and caring more about colleagues in these ways, many participants have shared with us, helps them better appreciate and navigate the beautiful diversity (developmental or otherwise) present in nearly any team or relationship. While these foci can work for more established teams, too, check-ins can also evolve to also address work-related updates and announcements, and reflections on collaborative processes themselves (e.g. “How do you think we’ve been doing as a team? Does anyone have any reflections on our last meeting?”) (Drago-Severson, 2009; Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016).

Making expectations clear – from both sides
Clarifying expectations from both sides (meaning from feedback giver and receiver) before feedback and revisiting these core agreements over time is also essential – especially since adults will bring different understandings of feedback to the table depending upon their ways of knowing and prior experiences. Here, especially, an understanding of adult development and ways of knowing is key. Indeed, explicitly discussing and developing shared understandings of feedback preferences, hopes, processes, confidentiality, and logistics upfront can help relieve anxiety, enhance the process, and minimize miscommunication. After all, there is so much about feedback that can be taken for granted, and that warrants consideration ahead of and over time. For example, will the feedback be formative or summative? Confidential or public? Formal or informal? With what style and tone will the feedback be delivered? What would feel most important and comfortable to everyone involved? What happens when stakeholders disagree? Talking about these important logistics, hopes, expectations, and developmental preferences can help alleviate some of the ambiguity often associated with feedback, and also equip us to
better meet colleagues where they are without “misfiring the message” (as one leader in our research termed it).

To help illustrate the importance of sharing expectations upfront, please consider the story of Denise and Sylvia[1], two teachers who were engaged in a mentoring relationship. As a newer teacher, Denise was excited when Sylvia – a highly experienced and effective veteran colleague – was assigned as her mentor. Because (in her estimation) Denise was more socializing in her way of knowing at the time, what she was really wanted from Sylvia was a safe context in which to talk and learn, and a trusted ally who could support her growth in an expert and caring way. This dynamic was important to Denise because she often felt vulnerable when she made what she saw as “mistakes” in her teaching, and felt nervous about “messing up” in front of Sylvia, who she saw as a “super star teacher.” Sylvia, however, was more self-authoring in her meaning making at the time, and what she felt would be of best support to Denise was straightforward feedback about what she needed to fix or improve (as this was the kind of mentoring she herself would have preferred).

So, while Sylvia offered her critiques to Denise in the spirit of genuine support, Denise – on the inside – was feeling hurt and discouraged by Sylvia’s focus on what she saw as her “negatives,” and failed to make much progress on her goals. As you might imagine, Denise’s limited progress was frustrating for Sylvia, too, who in turn “amped up” her efforts by offering more and more feedback. It wasn’t until Sylvia and Denise learned about ways of knowing in a workshop that they were able to recognize the inadvertent “mismatch” – and mutual good intentions – of their efforts. “Why didn’t you ever tell me how you were feeling?” Sylvia asked Denise, genuinely sorry that she hadn’t known about Denise’s needs and experiences. “I didn’t want to disappoint you,” Denise confided honestly – and, from there, they were able to talk more openly about what would feel like a safe and productive mentorship for both of them.

As this example helps makes clear, prioritizing time and space to engage in these kinds of conversations upfront – or at any point they seem needed – can help you anticipate and proactively address potential miscommunications and frustrations in your feedback and collaboration. In light of this, below is a list of sample questions you can explore with colleagues to learn more about educators’ feedback hopes, preferences and expectations:

- What are your hopes for our feedback session?
- Can you please help me understand what worked well for you when receiving feedback in the past? In other words, can you think of a time when someone offered feedback to you and you found that you were able to take it in and then act upon it? Who gave you the feedback? What was your relationship like with that person? What was it about what the person said or did that helped you?
- From your perspective, what is the purpose of feedback? What do you see as most important – or, what do you see as a hoped for outcome?
- When you think about a productive feedback session, what would feel most helpful and supportive to you?
- Please take a moment to consider what, if anything, makes receiving feedback hard or challenging for you. Can you think of a time – recently – when you received feedback that was difficult to take in, or that you didn’t think worked? What made it hard or painful for you? Why do you think it was challenging for you?
- Most of all, can you please help me understand what I can do to make our feedback sessions more meaningful and useful for you? I ask because I want to support you – and because I want to get better at offering you feedback that can help you.

As you may already suspect, not all colleagues will feel comfortable answering these questions in the same way (e.g. socializing knowers may need time to consider their own
responses before hearing valued others’), so providing opportunities for private reflection and/or small-group sharing can be very helpful when working to clarify expectations (in addition to asking these questions directly).

**Sharing developmental theory and practices**

While, as mentioned, deepening understandings of developmental theory can help all leaders improve their feedback (as both givers and receivers), our systematic research illuminates the promise of sharing developmental ideas with others, too. Rather than keeping a developmental lens in one’s proverbial back pocket (as a private tool to better understand others), openly sharing central ideas from constructive-developmental theory can help colleagues develop a shared language for talking about growth – as well as the feedback supports and challenges that would be most helpful for individuals and groups. As one aspiring school leader recently shared after learning about ways of knowing in a graduate course, “I’ve learned about the various stages of child development in my role as a teacher, but have had little exposure to the idea of there being stages to adult development. I am excited to bring this back to my school!” As she continued, this would be a new way to “spread the love.”

Like leadership itself, giving and receiving feedback is a responsibility and process that is collaborative, interactive, and often emotional, so inviting more adults to the developmental table (so to speak) will only increase the number of colleagues ready to engage intentionally in a culture of feedback. No one person could (or should have to) provide all the supports in a learning community, so sharing developmental ideas with the colleagues in your care (e.g. to help them prepare for and/or enhance mentoring relationships, grade level teams, curriculum committees, professional development sessions, parent and community meetings, and more) can help them work even more productively together in the spirit of mutual support and recognition.

Related to all of this, we’ve found that – when introducing developmental ideas – it is very important to share them not as a grading system or diagnostic test, but as an invitation to think differently about our own learning needs and those of our colleagues. As mentioned earlier, all ways of knowing have both strengths and limitations, and there is no one “right” way to make meaning. Rather, what is most important is the goodness of fit between what a person feels ready to do and what is being asked of him or her (Drago-Severson, 2009, 2012). Likewise, and just as with difference of all kinds, there is great beauty in what we call developmental diversity, and in honoring the needs and experiences diverse knowers will bring to a relationship or group. Could you imagine, for instance, working in a school or on a team made up entirely of self-authoring knowers, especially if they did not agree on key issues?

Ultimately, while understanding more about ways of knowing can help leaders provide developmentally appropriate supports and challenges to those in their care, teaching these same colleagues about adult development can also help them see more deeply into their own strengths and growing edges, and to recognize the promise and potential of those around them. This may be one of the most powerful supports – and gifts – a leader could offer.

**Employing and strengthening collaborative structures**

As suggested in our discussion of the prior strategy, it is essential – when working to build a culture of feedback – to intentionally diffuse and infuse opportunities for support throughout an organization, rather than conceptualize feedback as stemming from a central leader/feedback giver. Related to this, prior research (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016) has illuminated the promise of four pillar practices for growth – teaming, collegial inquiry, mentoring, and providing leadership roles – that can serve as powerful, developmental structures for building capacity and exchanging ideas in teams, schools, districts, and beyond. These practices are referred to as “pillars” because, independently and in combination,
they can create and hold up an infrastructure for rich, authentic collaboration (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009) and meaningful feedback system-wide (Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016).

While we discuss these practices in greater detail elsewhere (please see Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2013; Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2018), their most central intention involves reframing collaborative practices – that you may already be familiar with or engaging in – as intentional, developmental contexts for growth. In this way, the pillars are not about adding more to an already initiative-heavy landscape, but about doing what we are already doing even better, and with larger purpose, scope, and developmental intentionality. In this way, educators can benefit from peer support and collegial feedback, which we know is a powerful driver for student success in K-12 contexts (Hattie, 2012b). With this in mind, we offer in Table II a series of research-based tips and takeaways for engaging in the pillars as developmental practices for internal capacity building curated from our larger body of research (Drago-Severson, 2004b, 2009, 2012, 2016; Drago-Severson et al., 2013; Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2018).

Across the system, individuals and teams are yearning for more effective ways to collaborate with colleagues and grow together (Edmonson, 2014; Tomlinson and Murphy, 2015; Troen and Boles, 2011). This is true for educators hoping to enhance their feedback and collaborative processes more generally – and also in relation to working across lines of difference (e.g. race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and more). Promisingly, the pillar practices can help bring adults together to examine assumptions, broaden perspectives, explore pressing issues of practice, and see more deeply into themselves and others. This, as you know, is the “stuff” of internal and organizational capacity building. As a seasoned principal, whose school went on to win numerous student achievement awards after implementing the pillar practices, recently shared with us, “These structures make the magic happen.” We hope that for you, too, employing collaborative structures will help set the stage for even more meaningful growth and feedback in your context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pillar practice</th>
<th>Developmental tips and takeaways</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaming</td>
<td>Create time and space for colleagues to work together</td>
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<td>Share hopes and expectations for the collaboration</td>
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<td>Differentiate opportunities for participation</td>
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<td>Open and close by “checking in and out” – and/or inviting team members to share and reflect on</td>
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<td>their experiences in and out of the team</td>
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<td>Providing leadership roles</td>
<td>Offer both private and open invitations into roles (as this can help widen the breadth of</td>
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<td></td>
<td>participation)</td>
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<td>Consider the match between a person and a potential leadership role</td>
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<td>Ask how you can help</td>
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<td>Remain in place over time to offer support as the person takes on new responsibilities</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and leadership</td>
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<td>Collegial inquiry</td>
<td>Establish norms and confidentiality agreements</td>
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<td>Start with small, safe topics</td>
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<td>Practice with the less personal</td>
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<td>Model vulnerability and openness to feedback when introducing the practice to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>colleagues (this can help set a safe and trusting foundation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td>Consider the developmental match between the mentor and mentee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Clarify expectations (from both sides)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Discuss expectations and hopes for a productive mentoring experience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Invite mentee to share preferences for supports, challenges, and feedback</td>
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<td>Establish mutual understanding about what is on-the-record/evaluative, and what is</td>
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<td>formative/confidential</td>
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Table II. Developmental tips and takeaways for the pillar practices

Source: Adapted from Drago-Severson (2009) and Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano (2018)
Conclusion and significance

For many years, John Hattie (2012a) has argued that teacher feedback is one of the most powerful influences on student achievement – although this influence can be either positive or negative. Research about professional feedback in both the education and business sectors similarly points to the banes and boons of the feedback adults give and receive (e.g. Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2017; MacDonald, 2011; Marshall, 2013; Stone and Heen, 2014), yet a developmental perspective has been largely missing from this literature. In this paper, we described the importance of building a culture of feedback that supports meaningful collaboration and connection as the foundation for any meaningful change. The fact is, we all need to feel well held (Drago-Severson, 2012) in our work and learning to lean into the risk and exhilaration of growth – and to share our honest thinking, feeling, and feedback with others. Toward this end, this paper outlined six promising, developmental strategies for nurturing the preconditions of trust, safety, and respect that set the stage for what educators in our research describe as “real” feedback: recognizing the value of mistakes, modeling vulnerability and a learning stance, honoring the (inter)personal, making expectations clear from both sides, sharing developmental theory and practices, and employing and strengthening collaborative structures (Drago-Severson and Blum-DeStefano, 2016).

We hope that these strategies – which bring together learnings from adult developmental psychology and our collective work and research with educators over more than two decades—will be helpful to you when supporting adults with different ways of knowing in your own feedback contexts, as they have been in professional learning initiatives in K-12 schools, districts, university/leadership preparation programs, PLCs, leadership institutes, and mentoring and coaching relationships. Given the urgent practical and moral imperatives in our classrooms, schools, and society – as well as the well-documented challenges of preparing educators to support a diverse (in every way) student body (Milner, 2010; Nieto, 2010) – authentic and effective feedback has never been more needed or more necessary. We have found that building a growth-oriented, developmental culture of feedback can help aspiring and practicing educators develop the internal capacities needed to take a greater perspective on themselves, others, and the system; support each other and their students in new and beautiful ways; and venture forward courageously with their vital feedback and collaborations. Promisingly, all of this enhances and strengthens the professional capital – and magic – we create with and for one another.

Note

1. We present the story of Denise and Sylvia (pseudonyms) as a representative, composite example that draws together details from our ongoing research and work with educators.

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Further reading


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