Feedback conversations for leader development: An exploration from multiple perspectives.

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Abstract

Use of feedback for developmental purposes is a billion-dollar industry, and many organisations now use instruments such as 360º/ multi-rater feedback and psychometric assessments as standard parts of their approach to leader development. These tools have, in part, supported the growth of coaching, lending credence to the role of the coach. While quantitative and performance-related research abounds, we know little of the lived experience of participants, their sense-making of developmental feedback conversations and their explanations for outcomes. In this pragmatically informed mixed methods study, situated in a large global engineering company, senior leader recipients and sanctioned providers (internal and external coaches) were invited to recall memorable incidents of developmental feedback and how they had interpreted them. Findings revealed the significance of feedback from a leader's immediate network and the importance of high psychological safety and trust between participants. The study elaborates on our current understanding of the developmental feedback process and provides a conceptualisation of the conditions that mediate feedback acceptance or rejection as perceived by participants. The study also revealed differences in methods of feedback delivery and the stance of the providers, highlighting potential associated ethical issues. Drawing from complexity theories, a conceptualisation of feedback conversation as a 'complex responsive' process is offered to interpret findings at the organisational, interpersonal dyad and intrapersonal levels. This suggests that previous conceptualisations of feedback may be overly simplistic, underplaying the contextual, interactional and socially constructed nature of the phenomena. Recommendations for stakeholders based on the findings and this perspective are offered to stakeholders.

Keywords: Developmental feedback, leader development, coaching, complex responsive processes, complexity

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I have been giving feedback to leaders in organisations all my professional life in the various capacities of OD specialist, change manager, internal and external coach, trainer and group facilitator. This has taken the form of debriefing psychometrics and personality assessments, explaining 360º/ multi-rater feedback reports as part of leadership training programmes, as well as offering spontaneous comments and reflections to clients as part of coaching sessions. I did this, legitimised by my roles, with the genuine intent of helping leaders to learn something about themselves and hopefully positively impact on how they lead their people and the results they achieve.

However, despite this positive intent, the impact on recipients, in my experience, can be widely different and often unpredictable. The short stories below, taken from events in my practice, illustrate some of the range of reactions I have witnessed in recipients, the potential power dynamics at play, and some of the relational difficulties created. While many recipients seem to find feedback of interest, at least to some degree, others actively or passively seem to resist. Practically, many seem to struggle to translate feedback messages into tangible action and change or indeed, on occasion, to remember it at all.

Story 1: Hurt (2010): When she read the verbatim comments in her 360-feedback report, I heard her sharp intake of breath. Nothing in the commentary from her colleagues was positive, and much was harshly critical. She started to cry. I listened at the other end of the phone as she poured her troubles out.

Story 2: Recognition (2018): "That (coaching) session was really useful. You helped me to see something that I had not realised. I've made a connection I've never seen before – something has shifted in me".

Story 3: Resistance (2005): The MBTI team session was in full swing when he suddenly stood up and headed for the door. 'I won't be psychoanalysed, you can't put me in a box' he shouted at me, red-faced. The group and I sat stunned as he crashed the door shut. He didn't come back.

Story 4: Power (2012): He was about as senior as they get in the organisation. We had been going through the results of his FIRO-B (psychometric). I'd been asking if he recognised the results. Out of nowhere, he said, 'You do know people like me find people like you completely terrifying Alison'. I didn't know how to reply.

Story 5: Judgement (2016): 'Well he's obviously completely lacked any self-awareness' the coach told me. 'I don't think anyone has had the guts to tell him the truth before, but I did!'

Feedback-giving seems to be an assumed part of the role for coaches and HR professionals, often legitimised in service of raising a client's level of 'self-awareness' and general development. For example, Passmore (2012) alludes to a natural fit between coaching and use of psychometrics:

> *"Psychometrics can also offer useful insights for coachees… as part of a wider development conversation. The reports provide feedback or insights which, when combined with discussion, can provide a useful way of thinking about current ways of being and planning new ways of being." (Passmore, 2012 :1)*

However, I have often pondered the degree to which, for example, the use of psychometrics positions myself as a 'psychological expert' and how compatible this is with achieving equality of relationship with my clients and upholding a non-directive stance (Rogers, 2004). I have also been uneasy that such instruments may, on occasion, be more for the benefit of the coach than the client, a concern echoed by Western (2012).

Providing feedback is, therefore, an aspect of my work that I have found both personally troubling and professionally stretching from the perspectives of ethics, efficacy, and impact. However, few of these concerns appear reflected in the wider empirical, theoretical or practitioner literature. The empirical literature on feedback appears mostly positivist/quantitative in nature, concerned primarily with the conditions and causal links between feedback giving and (task) performance, or the efficacy of particular instruments and tools. In the practitioner literature, while there is a common interest in the methods of effective delivery of (negative) feedback, there is little critical discussion of the assumptions held by participants, their practical experiences or the potential dynamics at play.

In summary, this study adds to the theoretical debate regarding the role of feedback in developmental change and illuminates the experiences of feedback conversations according to participants' perceptions. As such, the study contributes to knowledge in the field of leadership development and potentially contributes to further understanding of adult development and change. In addition, the study applies a mixed-methods approach and Grounded Theory methodology and therefore, potentially contributes to the development and deployment of research methods guided by these approaches. At a practical level, the output of the study informs the design and delivery of feedback interventions in organisational settings, and as such is, of significant value to HR professionals, coaches and mentors and other practitioners tasked with delivering feedback in organisations.

1.1 Feedback as a concept

Feedback comes in many guises and from many sources, including our reflection in the mirror in the morning, unsolicited comments from friends and family as well as via more formalised processes (e.g. annual performance appraisal, 360º/ multi-rater feedback) as used in many organisations. Feedback sits at the juncture of the individual and their external environment, mediating and regulating the relationship and 'fit' with the environment. From feedback, individuals can develop a sense of themselves in relationship to others, as well as learning how to shape and influence the environment they inhabit. Feedback can therefore signal both the degree an individual has adapted to external circumstances as well as relative success in influencing that environment. Feedback is therefore considered fundamental to learning about the self in relation to our environment (Mory, 2004) and without which we risk self-delusion (Dunning, 2006, 2013).

Feedback, as a term, has its roots in mechanics, cybernetics and engineering (Weiner, 1954). Drawing from Control Theory (Carver and Scheier, 1998, 2002; Gregory et al., 2011), feedback is seen as an essential part of system self-regulation whereby systems compare and adjust some aspect of performance or behaviour in comparison to an external reference level or performance goal. So construed, feedback is essentially value-free discrepancy information from the environment which allows systems functioning to adjust dynamically to external disturbances. (Figure 1-1)

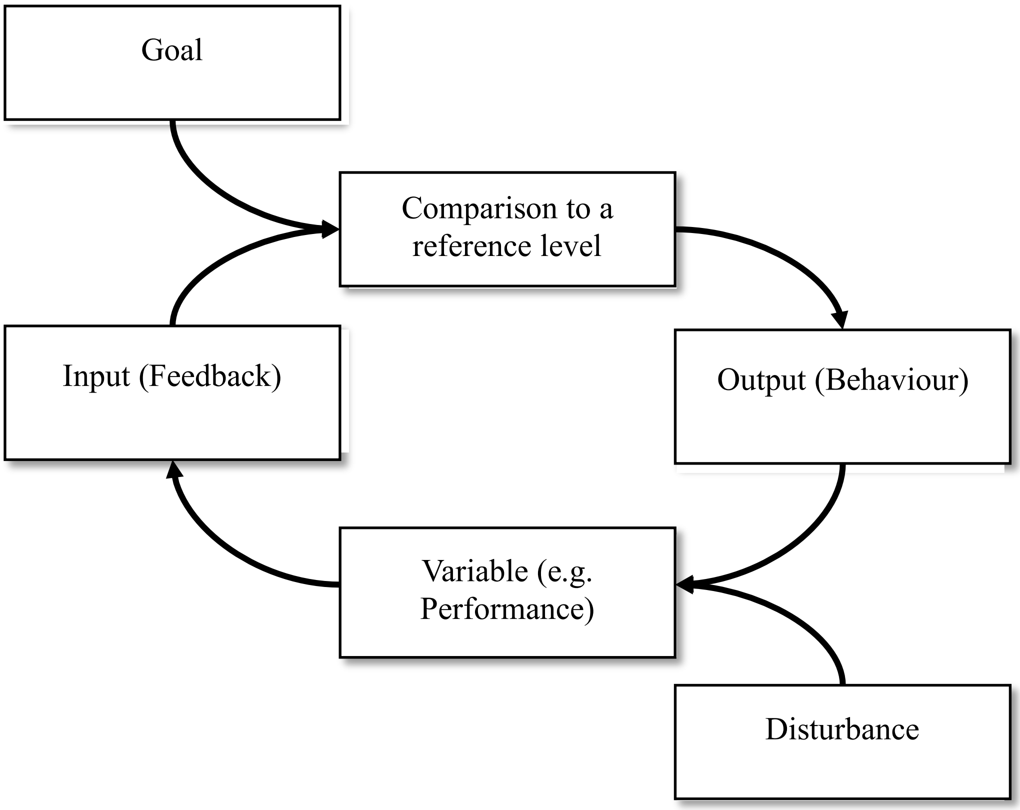

Figure 1-1: A simple control loop (Adapted from Gregory et al., 2011)

Feedback, as a metaphor applied to human systems, has many analogous characteristics but also many complicating factors. While criticisms, praise and advice can be seen as forms of (negative and positive) discrepancy information, feedback in human systems is rarely value-free and is bound up with issues of power, perception, discourses and agendas. Automatic acceptance and assimilation of feedback also cannot be assumed, particularly when external feedback messages conflict with our sense of self and our self-appraisals (Korsgaard, 1996). This is particularly so when we receive negative or critical feedback which runs counter to our own evaluations. Automatic changes and adjustments can therefore not be assumed. Indeed the impact of feedback interventions on outcomes seems to be mixed at best (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Mory, 2004). Kluger and DeNisi's (1996) seminal meta-study of feedback interventions and effects, for example, indicates that over one-third of feedback interventions (FI's) reported in their literature review resulted in deteriorations in (task) performance, particularly when that feedback was personally rather than task-directed.

In organisational settings, whilst managers are typically expected to give regular feedback to subordinates, many find this difficult (Kaplan, 2011; Moss and Sanchez, 2004; Western, 2012) and may consequently avoid full honestly. Giving feedback to a superior is seen as particularly problematic and giving direct feedback 'upwards' can be seen as 'career limiting'. Thus, whilst many leaders may intellectually understand the importance of honest, objective and challenging feedback for their growth and development, many may opt for a safer conversation:

> *"This type of honest performance and behavioural feedback is generally not readily available from the learners' colleagues as they fear repercussions, lack the skills and are afraid of upsetting their peers or seniors. Peers and colleagues hence provide 'nice' feedback which may lack in truthfulness, platitudes which lack in specificity or is ambiguous. The 'nice' feedback provided is useless and deprives the executive of the crucial information they need to develop and grow." (De Villiers, 2013: 67)*

1.2 Feedback forms in organisations

Feedback in organisation comes in many forms and used for many purposes. While often evaluative in nature and focused on influencing task performance (performance feedback), this study primarily explores feedback offered for the purposes of development (developmental feedback), specifically the development of leaders. Table 1-1 below contrasts developmental feedback with performance feedback:

Table 1-1: Task Performance feedback versus Developmental feedback

	Task performance feedback	Developmental leadership feedback
Purposes (e.g.)	Raise standards of performance Ensure task delivery	Raise capacity for leadership Development of 'self-model'
Focus (e.g.)	Accomplishment of tasks/ projects against predefined standards, objectives or expectations	Increase leader and leadership capacity, including intra-personal and inter-personal dimensions.
Means (e.g.)	Ad hoc comment Ability assessments Performance management and performance appraisal Formal and informal work reviews Self-evaluation Task completion/ results	Ad hoc comment Psychometrics/ Personality assessments 360/multi-rater feedback Development centres Training programmes Career and development conversations Peer feedback Self-evaluation
Parties (e.g.)	Line relationships Customer/Supplier relationships	Line relationships HR professionals External and internal coaches

Developmental feedback may include information and opinions on behaviours, personality or style, interpersonal impact and relationships with others at work, and is therefore altogether more personally directed and potentially more subjective in nature than performance feedback. Day (2000, 2011), for example, argues that leader development is focused necessarily on the intrapersonal 'self' of the leader (including self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation) as well as their interpersonal and relationship skills. He suggests that the goal of leader development is:

" ... to build intrapersonal competence needed to form an accurate model of oneself, to engage in healthy attitude and identity development and to use that self-model to perform in any number of organizational roles." (Day, 2000: 584)

While developmental feedback is often given within existing line management relationships, sanctioned third parties such as HR professionals, L&D professionals or coaches may deliver developmental feedback to leaders on behalf of the organisation. Types of developmental feedback include psychometric and personality assessments, development centre observations, 360º/ multi-rater feedback and other ad hoc commentary. These individuals may have specialist training in interpreting the results of psychometric instruments as well as general training in debriefing techniques.

While the precise size of the commercial 'feedback industry' is unknown, there are indications that it is extensive and big business. For example, Zemke (1992) suggested that the United States' combined use of psychometrics for recruitment, team and personal development was in excess of $100 million per year. A global survey of assessment use (Lohff and Preuss, 2016) suggested that while 94% of respondents (HR professionals in 14 countries) used assessments for hiring and selection purposes, a significant proportion (63%) also used them for developmental purposes. This survey further suggested that while there was considerable variation in the type of development assessment used (Table 1-2). These tools were typically (but not exclusively) targeted at senior (86%) and junior (83%) management populations and more frequently used within large organisations (>5000 employees). For UK and USA based organisations, the use of personality questionnaires was considerably higher than the sample global average.

Table 1-2: Indicative global use of assessments for development purposes

		% All countries	**% UK**	**% USA**	**% Large organisations**
Use of assessments for development purposes		63	65	74	60
Assessment types used:	Development centres	84	69	67	71
	360º/ multi-rater feedback	40	44	48	52
	Personality questionnaires	20	57	48	30
Use at senior/junior management levels		86/83	80/77	88/69	74/76

Source: The Global Assessment Barometer (Lohff and Preuss, 2016)

In the coaching market, while there is little concrete data concerning the use of feedback for developmental purposes, there are many indications that this is a common practice (Harper, 2008). Indeed, many of the suppliers of psychometrics actively market to coaches (Hemmingsen, 2015) and provide training and interpretive reports specifically targeted at coaches. For example, Gallup (2018), Hogan Assessments (2018) and OPP (2018) all offer reports in support of coaching dialogue. In one of the few quantitative studies of its kind, McDowall and Smewing (2009) found, in an (albeit self-selecting) sample of practising psychologist-coaches, over 86% used personality measures and 56% used 360º/ multi-rater feedback.

1.3 Overview of the Literature

The literature on feedback is extensive and multi-disciplinary, with empirical research dating back almost 100 years (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). Studies of feedback interventions and their effects can be seen in a wide range of contexts, including leadership development (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; DeRue and Wellman, 2009) and coaching (Allen et al., 2012; Cooper, 2010; Gorce-Bourge, 2010; Gregory et al., 2008; McDowall, 2012; Smither et al., 2003). However, it is only relatively recently that cross-disciplinary perspectives have been developed (Sutton et al., 2012). Feedback research has covered a multitude of facets, and much of the research explores potential causal links between feedback giving and (task) performance. However, the efficacy of feedback in promoting development is unclear (Bailey and Austin, 2006). Instead, the general debate often centres around the use of particular tools (especially 360º/ multi-rater feedback, psychometric feedback and personality assessments) rather than the conditions promoting acceptance and utilization. Further, empirical work is mainly quantitative in nature, predominantly focusing on feedback-giving. Feedback for development, particularly leader development, is, therefore, a relatively under-explored area. There also appears to be little evidence of qualitative research exploring the perspectives of feedback participants (providers and recipients) and their experiences of feedback conversations, with the exceptions of Molaski (2006), Buckle (2012) and Dalby (2019).

As with the empirical literature on feedback research, the theoretical debate is multi-disciplinary and an implied component of most learning theories (Thurling et al., 2013). While attempts have been made to develop theories of feedback (De Villiers, 2013; Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996; London and Smither, 2002), a cross-disciplinary perspective has yet to emerge. As with much of the empirical literature, the concerns of these theorists are primarily with task performance. There is, therefore, a gap in the theoretical literature exploring the developmental effects of feedback.

In the leadership development literature, feedback is often seen as an implied element rather than an explicit focus. However, some authors more directly recognise the value of feedback in promoting the development of leaders and leadership development (Day, 2000, 2011; Day et al., 2014; McCall et al., 1988), and suggest it is a core developmental process, '*an essential and integral part of managerial development intervention* ' (De Villiers, 2013: 72). However, there is little that practically illuminates this 'essential and integral' process and critically examines the social and organisational discourses it contributes to and is informed by. Notable exceptions are Grint (2010) and Western (2013), who suggest that feedback plays a part in maintaining particular leadership discourses.

In the empirical coaching literature, the combined effect of coaching and 360º/ multi-rater feedback is a central concern in many studies (Jarzebowski et al., 2012; Kochanowski et al., 2010; Olivero et al., 1997; Thach, 2002). Other research has explored the use of psychometric assessments in coaching, mostly from the perspective of the perceived value of particular instruments to coaches (Harper, 2008; McDowall and Kurz, 2007, 2008; Nelson and Hogan, 2009; Scoular and Campbell, 2007). There appears to be much more limited research beyond these areas, and again little research considering the perspectives of the feedback recipient. Gregory et al.'s work (2011; 2008), based on the work of London and Smither (2002), is one of the few examples of a feedback theory developed specifically for a coaching context. Overall, Bozer and Jones (2018) rates the overall quality of studies into the importance of feedback interventions in coaching as relatively low.

In the coaching practitioner literature, feedback is usually positioned as one of many interventions at a coach's disposal, often as a deceptively simple or a 'taken for granted' skill (McDowall, 2012). 360º/ multi-rater feedback is seen as a common entry point to the work as well as a way of measuring and demonstrating the value of coaching interventions to the organisational client (McDowall and Smewing, 2009). A prime concern revolves around how to deliver perceived 'negative' or 'difficult feedback' to clients' and there are multiple formulations of feedback best practice (Blakey and Day, 2012; Downey, 2003; Rogers, 2004; Starr, 2008; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2014; Whitmore, 2002). However, little critical discussion exists regarding the ethics of feedback-giving, it's fit with coaching philosophies and the impact on the coaching relationship.

This study, therefore, contributes to theoretical and empirical knowledge, potentially informing and guiding those typically tasked with designing feedback interventions and delivering such information to leadership groups, e.g., HR and L&D professionals and coaches. A better understanding of how both providers and recipients experience feedback exchanges will also inform the design and delivery of organisational interventions.

1.4 Study aims, objectives and methodology

My research interest is in exploring how feedback participants (providers and receivers) experience and construe feedback conversations. Specifically, I focus on the use of feedback in the development of leaders in the context of large organisations. While some aspects of this topic could be addressed from within a Positivist/Objectivist frame, the study does not seek to test or verify existent theories of feedback. Instead, I aim to collect descriptions of experience, explore participant meaning-making and generate plausible explanations which might be useful to others in guiding practice. Research aspirations are therefore descriptive, exploratory and practical.

Specific research objectives to support these aims include:

1. To undertake a critical cross-disciplinary review of the feedback, leadership development and coaching literature to provide a theoretical, empirical and practical context to the study.
2. To undertake a mixed-methods study to
    a. explore the lived experience of feedback participants,
    b. contrast the experiences, perceptions and assumptions of recipient leaders with those of legitimized feedback providers
    c. explore the perceived conditions and factors contributing to individual change and development as a result of receiving feedback.
3. To analyse study data to generate plausible explanations/ models which might be useful in guiding practice.
4. To contribute to the theory and practice of coaching and leadership development and contribute to knowledge in the broader fields of human development and social psychology.

Methodologically, whilst taking a constructivist stance, the study is informed by pragmatic perspectives and utilizes a mixed-methods approach to data collection and analysis. In particular, the design of the study is informed by Grounded Theory methodology as articulated by Charmaz (2014) and Bryant (2017). The rationale for the choice of methods is elaborated in Chapter Three: Methodology.

The study is situated in a large global engineering company (see below), with data collected from three populations:

- Organisational leaders. An initial survey was conducted (91 respondents) to explore perceptions concerning developmental feedback. From this group, 12 respondents (L1- L12) volunteered to take part in semi-structured interviews to explore their experiences in-depth.
- Internal HR professionals/coaches. Six members (HR1-HR6) the organisations' HR function volunteered to be interviewed. All had the experience of giving feedback to the leadership cadre, in their capacity as an HR generalist or learning and development specialist.
- External coaches. Six coaches (C1-C6) with experience of offering leadership coaching within the organisation and of giving feedback to their leaders agreed to be interviewed.

Data from the survey and interview transcripts were loaded into NVIVO software, and a systematic analysis using constant comparison techniques was performed, as guided by Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM). Chapter 3: Methodology outlines details of the research process.

1.5 Organisational context to the study

The study was conducted within a large global engineering company (referred to throughout as XYZ Plc). I worked as a leadership development specialist and coach with this organisation for over ten years and led their flagship leadership development programme for six years. I have, therefore, been involved in programme design and delivery, coaching individual leaders as well as giving feedback to programme participants using 360º/ multi-rater feedback and various psychometric instruments. I have also facilitated peer feedback sessions and witnessed other coaches (internal and external) deliver feedback to the organisation's leadership. However, I had not coached any of the participants or discussed the study topic with them.

XYZ Plc is a leading global engineering business which designs, manufactures and services systems and components for aircraft, vehicle and machinery manufacturers. At the time of data collection, the organisation employed approximately 59,800 people in 33 countries. Of these, some 6000 employees were based in the UK. At that time, the group had sales in excess of £10billion. The company has operated autonomously since its founding nearly 250 years ago, until being the subject of a successful takeover bid.

XYZ Plc has field operations in over 160 plants, supported functionally by local, Divisional and Group Human Resources. These HR teams are responsible for overseeing, and providing expertise in, the entire employee life cycle (Figure 1-2) including the development of its leadership cadre. Group HR spend alone on leadership development (including training programmes, coaching, development centres, e-learning, etc.) ran to many millions with similar spend within the Regional divisions on local initiatives and programmes.

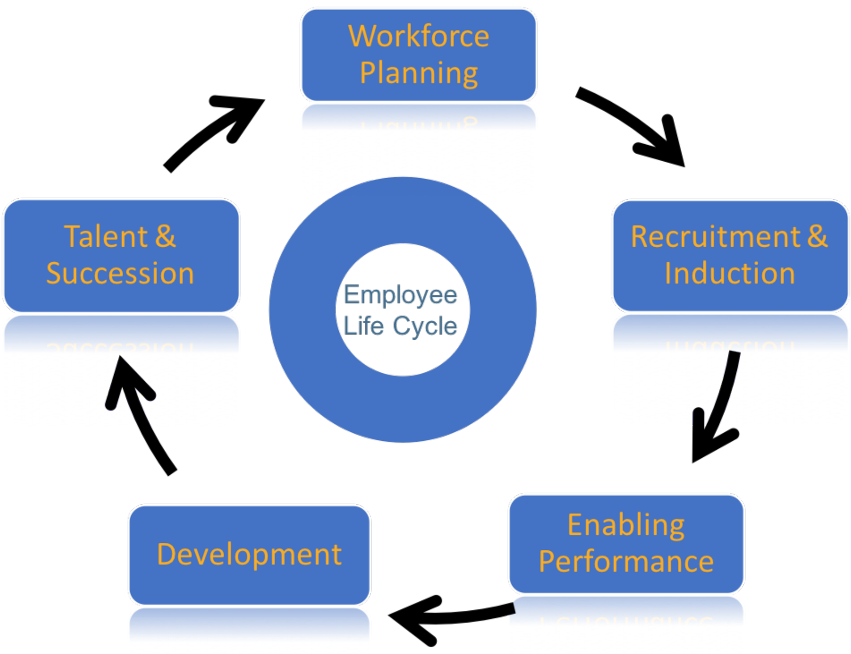

Figure 1-2: Employee life cycle (Source: XYZ Plc internal communication)

The organisation espouses a version of the ‘70:20:10’ approach to learning and development (McCall et al., 1988), which emphasises learning from work experiences over formal education. This approach encourages the everyday development of managers by their line managers. Line managers are, therefore expected to set development goals, provide coaching, and give feedback regularly as part of the overall approach to performance management (Figure 1-3). Providing feedback is, therefore considered a core managerial responsibility and the Group HR function offer training in feedback delivery as part of its development ‘menu’ for managers.

Figure 1-3: Performance management cycle (Source: XYZ Plc internal communication)

In addition, the organisation operates a formal talent and succession planning process designed to provide a 'pipeline' of leadership capability to the organisation (Charan et al., 2011). This annual organisation planning process, which takes place at all levels of management across the group, assesses talent and recommends career moves. This process identifies individuals for further specific development and nominates candidates for attendance on their internal leadership and management programmes and development centres. The organisation uses their 'Leadership Development Framework'(Figure 1-4) to structure formal development for leaders at all levels, as well as assess talent coming through the organisation at key transition points in their careers.

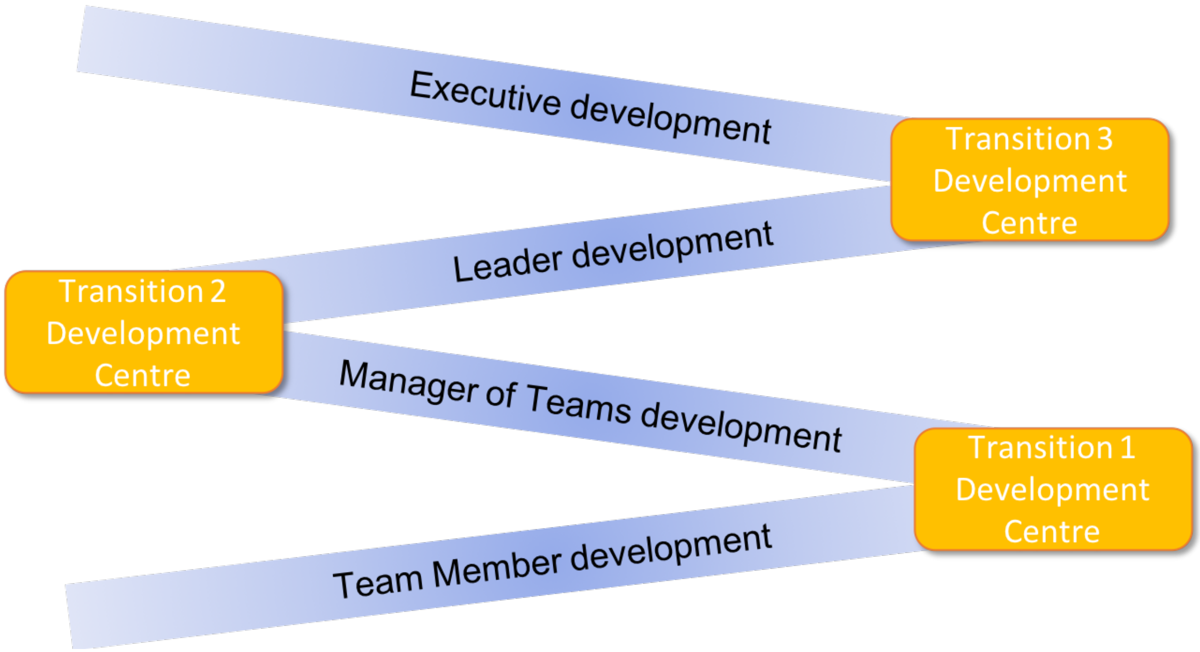

Figure 1-4: Leadership Development Framework (Source: XYZ Plc internal communication)

As in many organisations, the study organisation deploys a wide range of developmental feedback in addition to that provided via line management relationships, including:

- Development centres. These are structured experiential events where participants are monitored during exercises and given feedback by trained observers from HR and external consultants. These are deployed for the twin purposes of assessing readiness for promotion and providing developmental feedback for individuals to progress their careers.
- Psychometric assessments and other personality instruments – including the use of MBTI (Step I), FIRO-B, Facet 5, and Strengthsfinder. One or more of these tools are used as integral parts of their leadership development programmes and team development events.
- 360°/multi-rater feedback. The organisation's 360°/multi-rater tool is based on their internal leadership competency framework and is deployed selectively as an element of formal leadership development programmes. For example, their flagship leadership

development programme uses 360º/ multi-rater feedback at the beginning and end of a year-long development process. However, 360º/ multi-rater feedback is also used to support individuals requiring remedial intervention. 360º/ multi-rater feedback is debriefed typically by identified individuals, i.e. internal and external coaches.

- Participation in team and other development events where peers exchange feedback.
- Internal and external coaching. The extent of use of coaching is unknown and appears to be mainly for remedial purposes. The organisation has recently consolidated its coaching provision and now uses a single provider.

1.6 Structure of the study

The organisation of the study is as follows:

- Literature review (Chapter 2). This chapter gives an overview of the substantial literature in this field, including empirical research, use of feedback for development in coaching and leadership development contexts and feedback theorising.
- Methodology (Chapter 3). This chapter details the philosophy guiding the study and provides an overview of the approach taken, showing how the research questions shaped the research process. The measures enacted to ensure the quality of output are also detailed.
- Findings (Chapters 4-6). These chapters summarise the major findings of the study for the leader (Chapter 4), HR professional (Chapter 5), and coach (Chapter 6) groups, respectively.
- Comparison of findings (Chapter 7). This chapter compares findings across the three different participant groups and makes initial comparisons with the literature.

- Discussion (Chapter 8) An interpretation of findings is presented, showing how the study both reinforces and contradicts current views.
- Conclusions and Recommendations (Chapter 9). This chapter highlights the contributions made by this study to knowledge. The methods employed are critiqued, and directions for future research noted. The chapter continues with a discussion of implications for stakeholders. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on the research journey.
- References. The thesis includes a full list of references used to support the study.
- Appendices – The appendices include additional materials referenced in the text. These include samples of data collected, examples of data analysis and examples of outputs.

Abbreviations

The study uses the following abbreviations:

360	360º/ multi-rater feedback
CAS	Complex adaptive systems
CGT	Constructivist grounded theory
CRP	Complex responsive processes of relating
Cx	Coach ‘x’ participant
EQ/EI	Emotional Intelligence
FI	Feedback intervention
FIRO	Fundamental Interpersonal Relationships Orientation
GTM	Grounded Theory methodology
HR	Human Resources
HRx	HR ‘x’ participant
IPA	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
L&D	Learning and development
Lx	Leader ‘x’ participant
MBTI	Myers-Briggs Type Indicator
OGT	Objectivist grounded theory
SOA	Self-Other Agreement

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature concerning the use of feedback for the development of leaders, specifically in organisational settings. This material is used to locate the study in the context of existing debate and to show how it relates to other studies in this area. The review summarises the condition of the extant literature, as well as delineating gaps in knowledge. An earlier version of this review (Maxwell, 2017) was published in the Sage Handbook of Coaching (Bachkirova et al., 2017) and is included as part of the thesis submission.

While the feedback, coaching and leadership development literature are large and growing, less has been written that specifically addresses the convergence of these three topics. Figure 2-1 below illustrates this point by showing 'hit' results from Google Scholar (July 2020) using combinations of 'leadership development', 'coaching' and 'feedback'.

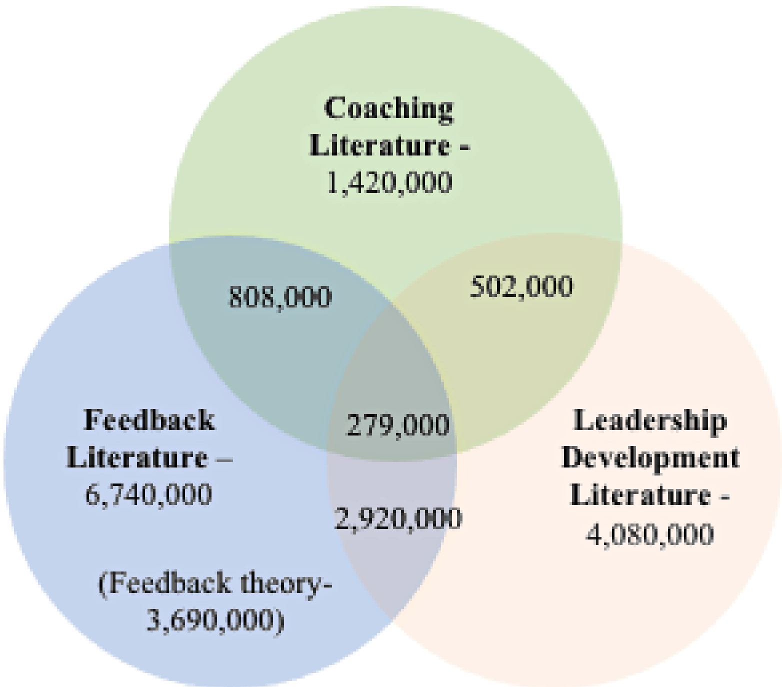

Figure 2-1: Number of 'hit' results from Google scholar (July 2020)

This literature review has attempted to stay within the convergence of these topics, specifically considering the use of developmental feedback by sanctioned providers (i.e., internal and external coaches, L&D professionals, HR professionals). However, the scope of this review has necessarily expanded to consider parts of the psychology and counselling literature regarding the role of feedback in the development of the 'self'. The literature review has also considered the role and positioning of feedback in the broader coaching literature by including a wide range of coaching practitioner sources.

The literature review considers the major forms of feedback as used in organisational leadership development, including 360º/ multi-rater feedback, psychometrics and personality assessments. However, discussion of the technical properties of such instruments was deemed as outside of scope. Similarly, while recognising that performance feedback (e.g., annual appraisal activity, task-based performance commentary) is a key part of feedback practices in most organizations, this has also been excluded.

The literature included in this review garners from a broad range of sources, the search resulting in over 700 academic articles, websites and books. These were found by searching a variety of academic (e.g., EbscoHost, Emerald Insight, Business Source Complete, Wiley Online Library, Taylor Francis Online, Sage Journals) and commercial databases (e.g., Amazon, Academia, Google Scholar). Multiple search terms, including 'developmental feedback', feedback and coaching', 'leadership feedback', were used to hone searches. Additionally, other relevant materials were identified from citations in pertinent articles, as well as by trawling relevant journals.

The chapter divides into three major parts covering the empirical, practitioner and theoretical literature.

2.1 Empirical literature

This section reviews the empirical literature regarding feedback, including an overview of the contexts of study and the facets explored. Studies specifically relating to developmental feedback for leaders, are noted and discussed.

Empirical feedback research dates back over 100 years (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996) and is extensive and multi-disciplinary. Studies of feedback interventions and effects can be seen in a wide range of contexts, including education (Hattie, 2012; Hattie and Timperley, 2007), sports (Turman, 2008), psychology (Markus, 1977), health education (Klatt and Kinney, 2012), cultural studies (Piff and Medoza-Denton, 2012), family and parenting studies (Sanders et al., 2012; Shanley and Niec, 2010) as well as the fields of organisational behaviour (Levy and Thompson, 2012), and performance enhancement (Balcazar et al., 1985; Hillman et al., 1990). However, it is only relatively recently that cross-disciplinary perspectives have been developed (Sutton et al., 2012).

Empirical feedback research has also covered a multitude of facets, including, for example, the effects of feedback valence, (Brown, 1986), frequency (Fedor and Buckley, 1987), conditions of acceptance or rejection (Ilgen et al., 1979), feedback-seeking or avoidance (De Stobbeleir and Ashford, 2012), motivation (Harackiewicz, 1979), organisational relationships (Geddes and Baron, 1997), goal setting (Harackiewicz, 1979), subsequent engagement with development activity (Woo et al., 2008) and, of course, links to task performance improvements (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996). Much of this (quantitative) research assumes a causal link between feedback giving and (task) performance. However, this has been comprehensively challenged by Kluger and DeNisi (1996), who found only a modest link between feedback and subsequent improvements. They found that as much as one-third of feedback interventions detrimentally impacted (task) performance, particularly when directed toward the 'self' of the recipient. More recent studies have replicated these sort of findings, for example, Smither et al. (2005) also found limited evidence for a causative link between feedback and performance improvement.

To date, the empirical study of feedback for developmental purposes has been much more limited compared to the body of work into performance effects. Such studies have primarily focused on the properties and efficacy of feedback instruments, specifically psychometrics (Harper, 2008; McDowall and Kurz, 2007; Scoular and Campbell, 2007) or the use of 360º/multi-rater feedback in a variety of leadership contexts (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Atwater and Brett, 2006; Atwater et al., 2000; Smither et al., 2005).

In particular, the deployment of 360º/ multi-rater feedback has provided a rich seam for empirical study. Much work has focused on dimensions of 'self-other agreement' (SOA) (Atwater et al., 1998; Atwater and Yammarino, 1992; Bass and Yammarino, 1991; Fleenor et al., 1996) as a way of operationalising measurement of leadership 'self-awareness'. In general, this research suggests that close self-other agreement is linked to measures of leadership effectiveness but does not confirm that this holds in all contexts (Fleenor, 2010). Other facets of study include reactions to results (Facteau et al., 1998), and perceptions of accuracy and usefulness (Brett and Atwater, 2001), which broadly suggest that individuals have skewed perceptions of such data, with a tendency to ignore or challenge less favourable ratings. Studies of 360º/ multi-rater feedback have also attempted to make links with other forms of feedback, for example, development centre findings (McEvoy and Beatty, 1989) and leadership psychometric profiles (Bass and Avolio, 1995). Studies have also investigated links with individual variables, for example, gender differences (Fletcher, 1999; Rosener, 1990), and leadership style (Bass et al., 1996). Other authors have focused their attention on the consequences of receiving such feedback, including, for example, attitudinal changes (Atwater and Brett, 2006), propensity to engage in follow up development (Hazucha et al.; Maurer et al., 2002), and longer-term follow-up activity (Walker and Smither, 1999). These studies suggest that changes do not automatically follow feedback, for example, Bailey and Austin (2006) found that the link between 360º feedback and follow up development activity was weak and strongly mediated by recipient reactions:

> *"The feedback–performance association observed in the current study would suggest the 360- feedback process may provide approbation for those that are performing but has less positive consequences for those individuals receiving negative feedback. How to manage reactions appropriately is a complex issue; this study would suggest that greatest care is needed when facilitating feedback that is negative; it cannot be assumed that individuals will have constructive reactions to negative ratings."*
> *(Bailey and Austin, 2006: 63)*

More recently empirical studies have focused on the use of 360º/ multi-rater feedback in a coaching context (Cooper, 2010; McDowall and Kurz, 2008; Smither et al., 2003; Smither et al., 2005; Thach, 2002). These support the general effectiveness of 360º/ multi-rater feedback, when combined with a coaching programme, particularly in promoting follow-on activity. However, some studies report more mixed results (Luthans and Peterson, 2003), and it has proved challenging to disentangle the relative contribution of 360º feedback and coaching to leader development.

Beyond 360º feedback research, a more recent avenue of study concerns the origins and determinants of recipient receptivity to feedback (Bozer et al., 2013; Gregory and Levy, 2012; London and Smither, 2002), attempts to measure this property and correlate it with intervention outcomes (Braddy et al., 2013; Linderbaum and Levy, 2010). Some of these studies suggest that feedback receptivity (or feedback 'orientation') is a significant factor in engagement with coaching, and impacted on coaching relationships (Gregory and Levy, 2012). However, a study by Ryan et al. (2000) into receptivity to assessment-based feedback was less conclusive and suggested little congruence between provider and recipient views regarding recipient 'openness' to feedback.

To summarise, empirical feedback research into the use of developmental feedback has largely been quantitative in nature and mainly concerned with feedback effects or instrument properties. To date, there has been relatively little qualitative research in this area, with a few notable exceptions which investigated recipient perceptions of psychometric instruments and personality profiles (Buckle, 2012; Dalby, 2019) and 360º/ multi-rater feedback interventions (Mabey, 2001). Little attention has, therefore, been paid to the lived experience of both feedback participants (recipients and providers), their perceptions of feedback conversations and the conditions they feel impact on feedback outcomes. In particular, the role, stance and influence of the feedback provider appears to be an under-explored area to date.

2.2 Practitioner literature

In this section, a range of coaching literature is reviewed regarding the treatment and positioning of feedback as a developmental intervention. The scope of this section of the review is limited to literature aimed at practising coaches, internal or external to the organization, which necessarily includes those in HR roles offering coaching and development services to their leaders. Dominant patterns of discourse will be discussed, along with some of the contradictions and debates that the practitioner literature highlights. The section also examines the literature concerning specific types of feedback intervention.

2.2.1 General patterns of discourse

In broad terms, the positioning and treatment of feedback in the coaching practitioner literature is highly variable, with performance feedback and developmental feedback often used as interchangeable terms. For some authors, feedback is perceived as central and essential to the work of a coach, for example, Zeus and Skiffington (2000: 101) state that '*feedback is the heart of the coaching relationship'*. This point is echoed by Rogers (2004), who sees feedback as one of the distinguishing features of a coaching conversation, which separates it from other forms of conversations:

> *"This is probably the single most significant way in which a coaching conversation differs from any other conversation our clients are likely to have…Coaching is one of the few occasions where anyone is permitted, even encouraged to comment on the immediate behaviour of the other person. Being able to do this with the honest intent to help the other person learn and with no wish for self-aggrandisement endows the act of giving feedback with enormous power." (Rogers, 2004: 199)*

However, other writers do not echo this assumed centrality to practice. Indeed, many authors make minimal or no reference to feedback as either a performance or a developmental intervention. For example, Flaherty (1999), Jackson and McKergow (2007), and Thorne (2004) makes no mention of 'feedback' directly or indirectly.

Between these two extremes, feedback is positioned more usually as an assumed part of a coach's role, as a common entry point to the work, and a useful diagnostic tool within the coaching relationship, as well as a way of potentially measuring coaching outcomes. Providing feedback is seen as one of many skills at a coach's disposal, often as deceptively simple and as 'taken for granted' (McDowall, 2012). With a few notable exceptions (McDowall, 2012) the treatment of feedback is generally uncritical, and almost always described in beneficial terms:

> *"Effective feedback can accelerate a coachees learning, inspire them, motivate them, help them feel valued and literally catapult them into action." (Starr, 2008: 122)*

A central concern running through the literature revolves around how to deliver perceived 'negative' or 'critical' feedback to recipients' and there are numerous formulations of best practice to deliver difficult feedback messages (Blakey and Day, 2012; Downey, 2003; Rogers, 2004; Starr, 2008; Van Nieuwerburgh, 2014; Whitmore, 2002). However, Buckingham and Goodall (2019a, 2019b) suggest that focusing on deficits is ineffective and even potentially damaging, and that development is better facilitated by attention to strengths.

The discussion of feedback in the wider coaching literature appears to be mostly atheoretical. Where theoretical ideas are referenced, they appear to rest on a few key models. For example, the Johari window (Luft, 1961) and Goleman's work on Emotional Intelligence and leader self-awareness (2002) appear to have been highly influential. The 'unaware' leader is therefore often assumed in many texts, and 'raising self-awareness' is seen as an important and legitimate, if undefined, development goal (Day, 2000; Reilly et al., 2014). More recently ideas from positive psychology (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) appear to be influencing debate, associated with the rise of strengths-based coaching (Biswas-Diener and Dean, 2007; Francis and Zarechy, 2017) and the use of strengths assessments (Gallup, 2018).

Whilst still a minority debate, several challenges and questions are raised in the coaching literature regarding the use of feedback:

- *The challenge to universal benefit.* As mentioned, with a few notable exceptions (McDowall, 2012; Western, 2012), giving feedback is almost universally described in the practitioner literature as a beneficial and positive intervention. This perspective, therefore, underplays empirical evidence suggesting that feedback giving is a considerably more complex and potentially less benign intervention.

- *The challenge to the 'non-directive' stance.* While much of the coaching literature espouses a non-directive style of working (Rogers, 2004), this stance potentially sits awkwardly with the practice of giving feedback. For example, Downey (2003) sees feedback as incompatible with a non-directive stance:

  "If the session has been run in a non-directive fashion and, suddenly and uninvited, the coach comes out with some feedback, it can be very disruptive to the session and can damage the relationship" (Downey, 2003: 85)

Further, Blakey and Day (2012) also suggest that feedback could be conflated with advice-giving, preventing the recipient from having the opportunity to learn and seek feedback for themselves.

- *The challenge to the equal power relationship.* Some authors question to what extent judgement and evaluation can be excluded from feedback giving (Downey, 2003). Ladyshewsky (2010) suggests that evaluation, or at least the perception of it, fundamentally shifts the power balance in the coaching relationship, prejudicing the effectiveness of the endeavour. This perspective also potentially does not sit comfortably with the use of some tools, particularly when judgements of behaviour, personality or the self is implied or articulated. Further, some authors (Rogers, 2004; Western, 2012) suggest that the use of psychometric tools endows the coach with expert knowledge and status, potentially disempowering the recipient.

- *The challenge of surrogacy:* Some authors challenge the appropriateness of coaches giving feedback to their recipients, when the message should be, more appropriately, delivered by the recipient's line management. Western (2012), for example, suggests that this sort of 'outsourcing' is both common and potentially undermining of the line management relationship. So construed, the coach, therefore, becomes a surrogate for third party voices, unable to defend or explain feedback data if challenged by the recipient.

2.2.2 Use of feedback tools and techniques

In broad terms, the forms of feedback most discussed in the coaching practitioner literature include the use of 360º/ multi-rater feedback, psychometrics, the coach's 'in the moment' experience of the coach (immediacy), mirroring and feedforward. This section explores the debate regarding each of these forms, as well as examining practitioner views on 'self-feedback'.

360º/ multi-rater feedback

Throughout much of the coaching and leadership development literature, 360º/ multi-rater feedback is seen as a useful measure of workplace behaviours (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998), with an implicit assumption that discrepancies between self-other ratings provide a spur to learning and development. 360º/ multi-rater feedback is described as a common entry point to coaching, as well as a way of measuring and demonstrating the value of coaching interventions to the organisational client (McDowall and Smewing, 2009). Rogers (2004), for example, suggests the value of 360º data as two-fold, firstly as a diagnostic instrument and secondly as a 'reality check' on the client's narrative:

> *"I suggest this process to perhaps a third of my coaching clients. When done well, there are few other ways as reliable of pinpointing a learning programme for a client. Mostly in coaching, we are dependent on storytelling from the client as the main source of data. When you commission a 360º process you are bringing the observation of others into play - hence its value."* (*Rogers, 2004: 91)*

Others describe the use of 360º data as a measure of client self-awareness, a means of checking client self-perceptions and a method of expanding self-knowledge:

> *"The coach can get a more contextual picture of the client and illuminate blind spots he or she does not see." (Rock and Page, 2009: 47)*

"Provision of 360º *feedback, revealing the perceptions of others, can offer an opportunity for the coachee to reflect on 'who am I being' as compared with 'who I want to be' and potentially 'who am I when I am truly myself'." (Donaldson-Feilder and Panchal, 2011: 125)*

While the position and value of 360º/ multi-rater feedback appears well established, McDowall (2012) argues that it should not be used uncritically. For example, she points to the potential for bias, both in their completion by rater and interpretation by recipients. Maxwell and Bachkirova (2010) similarly suggest distortions in how feedback is interpreted, depending on self-concept. McDowall (2012) also challenges unquestioning reliance on such instruments, questioning the psychometric properties and validity of some tools. She further suggests that untrained providers should not use such tools. Critics of 360º/ multi-rater feedback also point to the tendency of these tools to focus on development gaps rather than strengths, and more positively-oriented tools are gaining attention, e.g. reflected best-self (Roberts et al., 2005).

Psychometric instruments and personality assessments

As with 360º feedback, the use of psychometric instruments is seen as a popular entry point to coaching and as useful diagnostic tools for coaches (McDowall and Kurz, 2007; Western, 2012). For some, psychometrics are useful because they save time, offer the coach and recipient a useful shared vocabulary (Rogers, 2004), and give recipients enlightening insights (Buckle, 2012) in a way that might not otherwise be possible.

> *"Psychometrics offer a short cut through what might otherwise take many hours of further discussion, and the language of psychometrics can become a useful shared vocabulary not just between coach and client but between client and other clients" (Rogers, 2004: 97)*

However, Rogers (2004) also suggests that inexperienced coaches may be overly attracted to the use of psychometrics for self-serving reasons:

> *"Working with new coaches, I often observe undue interest in questionnaires such as the MBTI. We can all be attracted to these and other tools and techniques out of anxiety … When this is your motive, recognise it for what it is: a way of exerting control over the recipient and over your own fear of incompetence." (Rogers, 2004: 99)*

There are also suggestions that psychometrics may be inappropriately or poorly selected, without a rigorous understanding of the theories that underpin such tools or the limitations of their use. McDowall (2012: 71), for example, argues that coaches should be more aware of the quality and robustness of feedback instruments and suggest that poor quality instruments "*may at best be misleading and at worst could be seriously damaging, particularly if the content is negative*". A further concern is for the appropriate debriefing and interpretation of output (Driver, 2011; McDowall, 2012). These sorts of concern are reflected in publications on the use of psychometrics in coaching (Association of Coaching, 2008; Bourne, 2007) which call for coaches to be qualified appropriately in the use of psychometric instruments

Immediacy or 'in the moment' feedback

'Immediacy', with its origins in the therapeutic world, is the skill of offering the coaches' 'here and now' reactions to the recipient, as a way of helping the recipient to understand how they impact others (Driver, 2011; O'Neill, 2000; Pemberton, 2006). While relatively few authors discuss this form of feedback in any depth, it is assumed that the coaches' direct experience of the client mirrors their behaviours in their work environments and likely impact on others:

> *"The use of immediacy is the real gold of any coaching moment. Your own interaction with the executive is a window into his characteristic patterns. Particularly in the contracting phase, it is important to feedback your own experience, here and now, of our recipient, that is, what is happening between you. Again, you act on the belief that what happens in the immediacy of this moment happens 'out there' in the executives' or world." (O'Neill, 2000: 98)*

This form of feedback is therefore positioned as a potentially unique feature of a coaching relationship, in which coaches can give direct feedback they are unlikely to get from other sources. However, Driver (2011) points out the risk of contamination with the coaches' own perspectives, and there appears to be little or no discussion of the efficacy of this form of feedback, or associated ethical considerations.

Mirroring and paraphrasing

Some authors use the idea of 'mirroring' interchangeably with the concept of feedback. Forms of mirroring include restating, summarizing or rephrasing the recipient's words as a way of helping the recipient to 'see' their own thought processes and circumstances more clearly:

> *"Thus, reflecting back recipients' words communicates to them not only that their coach has heard them, but offers up a mirror to those words so that recipients can listen to what they have said."* *(Cox, 2013: 61)*

As with 'immediate' feedback, mirroring and paraphrasing occurs in the 'here and now' of the work. However, mirroring, as a form of 'clean language' (Sullivan and Rees, 2008), attempts to avoid any subjective bias, judgments or distortions that a coach might introduce by staying close to the recipients' words.

Cox (2013) highlights the difficulty of avoiding interpretations and biases, and McDowall and Millward (2010) suggest that non-recognition of feedback may be due to poor 'mirroring' technique as much as the recipient's lack of self-awareness:

> *"However, it matters how the mirror is held and whether people can recognise the reflection. If people can't see themselves clearly, feedback is unlikely to have any effect… people might be blind to their reflection (so unaware of what they are like in others' eyes) or alternatively, the lack of a mirror might be due to the fact that the mirror is not positioned appropriately so that people find it difficult to see themselves." (McDowall and Millward, 2010: 61)*

As with 'immediacy', this appears to be an under-researched area, however, studies of the effects of 'clean language' (Lawley et al., 2010) offer some insights.

Feedforward

Feedforward is the consideration of past solutions and best practices as a way of informing action in the present. This is an area that is getting increasing attention as a way for coaches to work with recipients (McDowall, 2012; McDowall and Millward, 2010) as it is seen as avoiding defensiveness and as enhancing of recipient's sense of self-efficacy. While empirical research is limited, some studies (Kluger and Nir, 2010; McDowall et al., 2014) suggest that feedforward may be a more effective intervention than feedback interventions. However, there is scope for more work in this area, particularly in looking at the combined effects of feedforward and feedback.

Encouraging self-feedback

An overlooked form of feedback in the coaching literature is self-feedback or self-assessment. This form can include suppressed or withheld information (Bachkirova, 2011; Haidt, 2001) brought into conscious awareness through reflection or discussion with another. In a coaching context, Whitmore (2002) argues that a recipient's self-assessment is the most effective form of feedback, avoiding defensiveness and most effectively facilitates learning:

> *"Generating high-quality relevant feedback, as far as possible from within rather than from experts, is essential for continuous improvement, at work, in sport and in all aspects of life." (Whitmore, 2002: 111)*

Whitmore and others argue that the role of the coach is not to deliver feedback messages on behalf of others, but rather to facilitate reflection and enhance the recipient's capacity to dispassionately self-observe. Developing the recipient's reflective and reflexive capability, without self-delusion, is therefore seen as the means of developing the recipients' self-awareness. However, to date, there has been limited discussion of self-deception in coaching (Bachkirova and Shannon, 2013) and is an area open for further study.

2.3 Theoretical literature

This section summarises and critiques some of the principal theories in this area, mainly focussing on feedback-related theories that have relevance to leadership development and coaching practices in organisational settings. While some of these theories explicitly recognise the role and centrality of feedback, the role of feedback is more often implied or assumed. Thus Mory (2004) suggests that:

> *"One could venture to say that no learning would occur unless some type of feedback mechanism was at work. What we do know is that feedback serves as a critical function of knowledge acquisition, regardless of the particular learning paradigm through which we choose to examine it." (Mory, 2004: 777)*

Feedback-related theory, as empirical research, is multi-disciplinary, drawing, for example from education and learning theories, mathematics, engineering and mechanics, cybernetics, communication, personal and social psychology. Any theories of feedback applied to leader development and coaching are therefore potentially inheritances from a wide variety of fields of knowledge and do not necessarily have any underpinning coherence.

This section outlines feedback-related theories drawn from adult learning theories, and psychological theories of the 'self', discussing their relevance and implications for feedback providers/ coaches. In addition, the section includes an overview of specific feedback theories and a review of the few theories specifically developed for coaching contexts.

2.3.1 Adult Learning theories

Objectivism

The Objectivist's stance on feedback (Table 2-1) suggests an external objective goal or standard which must be matched by modifying discrepant behaviours. This stance can be seen throughout the coaching literature and is closely aligned with Behaviourism (Atkinson et al., 1983; Skinner, 1968; Thorndike, 1927), Control Theory (Carver and Scheier, 2002), and Goal Setting Theory (Locke and Latham, 1990). For example, Gregory et al. (2011: 26-27) see Control Theory as a natural organizing framework for executive coaching and suggests that '*a primary purpose of effective coaching is to help coachees learn to better regulate their behaviour order to achieve desired outcomes'*.

This perspective suggests that feedback information should be used to point out areas of lack of 'fit' between the recipient and the demands of the external environment. For example, by using a 360º assessments discrepancies between a desired social standard (e.g. a leadership competency model) and self-perceptions are identified and actions created to close any gap (Yammarino and Atwater, 1997). The successful development of the individual then represents the extent the individual can assimilate external feedback and successfully replicate preferred behaviours and external norms.

This perspective has implications for the nature of the provider relationship and the underlying contract. So informed, the provider becomes an agent of the external environment, upholding the desired standards and goals rather than necessarily helping individuals to question or explore them. The role of the provider is to ensure discrepancies from standards are clear to the recipient and accepted as valid directions for change. Once accepted, the

Table 2-1: Summary implications of key adult learning theories

Perspective	Key theories/authors	Meaning/ purpose of feedback	Providers role	Learning and development	Provider stance
Objectivism	• Behaviourism (Atkinson et al., 1983; Skinner, 1968; Thorndike, 1927) • Control Theory (Carver and Scheier, 2002; Gregory et al., 2011) • Goal Setting Theory (Locke and Latham, 1990)	Discrepancy reduction against an external standard or goal	Ensure recipient's fit with the demands of the environment	Assimilation of external messages Replication of socially preferred norms and behaviours	Agent of the external environment
Constructivism	• Intentional Change Theory (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006) • Social-cultural theory (Thurling et al., 2013) • Social constructionism (Mory, 2004)	Individualised /contextual meaning-making	Assist in clarification and construction of feedback meaning	Integration of feedback into the self	Support to recipient meaning-making
	• Cognitive-developmental theories (Bachkirova, 2012; Berger and Fitzgerald, 2002; Cook-Greuter, 2004; Kegan, 1982)	Feedback as an indicator of developmental stage	Dependent on the developmental stage	Growth within and between development stages	A bridge between the development of self-concept and fit with the external environment

provider can then aid the recipient to find routes to change and create ways of self-monitoring progress. The provider must, therefore, work to overcome any resistance to unpalatable feedback and reluctance to change.

Constructivism

While conceptually appealing, the Objectivist paradigm has been criticized as overly simplistic, failing to explain the complexities of human motivation, ignoring prior knowledge, experience and opinion, and privileging an external reality. In contrast, Constructivist perspectives suggest that 'reality' is internally created by the individual and not separate from the context of their prior knowledge and experiences.

The Constructivist perspective (Table 2-1) purports that feedback recipients are not 'blank slates', suggesting that the meaning of feedback is subjective and inter-subjective. Development from this perspective, therefore, represents the ability to clarify and construct personal meaning, particularly from ambiguous or conflicting information from multiple sources. Integration of feedback, therefore, becomes the goal rather than mere assimilation.

Mory (2004) helpfully compares the assumptions underpinning feedback under 'Objectivist' and 'Constructivist assumptions of learning. Table 2-2 summarises this below.

Table 2-2: Comparison of feedback according to the learning paradigm

Objectivism	**Constructivism**
Feedback is based upon response match to external reality	Feedback is to guide the learner toward internal reality; facilitates knowledge construction
Feedback contains symbols for the learner to process	Feedback aids the learner in building symbols
Feedback not related to human experience; reflects external reality	Feedback in the context of human experience
Meaning within feedback information corresponds to categories in the world	Meaning within feedback information determined by internal understanding
Feedback contains symbols that represent external reality	Feedback provides generative, mental 'toolkits'

Adapted from Mory (2004: 771)

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Operating under the Constructivist paradigm, the role of the provider shifts from 'agent of the environment' to partnering the recipient to make sense of feedback received, scaffolding from their prior experiences to new understandings and knowledge. Thus, the provider might work with *how* the recipient constructs meaning from feedback, as much as the content of the message. Translation of feedback into action and behavioural changes is in comparison to personal (internal) goals. For example, in 'Intentional Change Theory' (ICT) (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006) the self-conceived 'ideal self' provides the fundamental driver for intended change rather than an external reference or standard.

Cognitive-development theories

Building on constructivist ideas, Cognitive-developmental theorists suggest that response to feedback may itself be a by-product of developmental stage, as opposed to input to it. They argue that feedback response is qualitatively different dependent on cognitive-developmental stage, irrespective potentially of content, valence or the skill of the provider (Table 2-1):

> *"No matter how skilfully a superior tries to critique an Opportunist employee, any such attempt will be reacted to as a personal affront or threat to their sense of self and power. The aggressive Opportunist will fight back, argue, and blame something (bad luck) or others (so and so screwed up) for the failure, but never admit to having made a mistake or needing correction". (Cook-Greuter, 2004: 7).*

Bachkirova (2011) proposes four broad stages of adult cognitive development (Table 2-3) and attempts to predict how recipients of 360º/ multi-rater feedback are likely to respond based on their particular developmental stage, and the consequent implications for a coaching relationship. By inference, Bachkirova, therefore, suggests that the role of the coach changes according to the stage of client development. At the 'unformed ego' stage, the coach focuses on helping the client to develop a stronger sense of self by attending to 'internal' feedback. At the 'formed ego' stage, the work of the coach is to privilege the external message, thus leaning towards the objectivist view. At the 'reformed ego' stage, the coach privileges neither the internal nor external perspective, but instead helps the client to explore potential meanings.

Whilst conceptually coherent, there appears to be no direct empirical support for this perspective. Furthermore, ideas of cognitive development appear far from being mainstream in the field of leadership development. However, this perspective suggests that responses to feedback are, at least in part, a product of individual developmental stage as opposed to the conditions and effectiveness of delivery, which has been much of the focus of most empirical research and practitioner debate to date.

Table 2-3: Response to feedback by developmental stage

<table>
<tr><th>Developmental Stage</th><th>Characteristics</th><th>Potential responses to feedback</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Unformed ego/ conformist</td><td rowspan="3">Influenced by others
View of self as an internalisation of how others see them
Dependence on other people</td><td>Potentially overly influenced by the views of others and not open to challenge.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Confirmatory feedback not seen as adding value and therefore little for the coach to work with.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Feedback worse than expected is potentially over-whelming or traumatising. Coaches role morphs to helping recipient deal with potential trauma rather than development.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Formed ego/ achievement</td><td rowspan="2">Confident in own view of themselves
Independence from other people</td><td>Feedback may be seen as incongruent if they hold a rigid self-conception / limited interest in their development.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Feedback may be seen as very useful if open to development.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reformed ego/ authentic</td><td>Able to hold multiple perspectives on self
Tolerance of ambiguity
Interdependence</td><td>Curious about feedback but importance will depend on what role it plays in other strategic areas of their life</td></tr>
<tr><td>Ego with a Soul/ transcendent</td><td>Broader and more holistic, including spiritual perspectives</td><td>Difficult to predict the role of feedback.</td></tr>
</table>

Adapted from Bachkirova (2011: 121-122)

2.3.2 Psychological theories

As with adult learning theories, many psychological theories and theories of the 'self' have potential implications for feedback practice. The following section highlights some key theories in this area, summarised in Table 2-4 below. Theories are classified broadly into the following categories:

- Self-awareness models – feedback as an indicator of discrepancies or blind spots in personal self-awareness.
- Self-concept models – feedback response as an indicator of self-concept or psychological health
- Conditions of acceptance models – conditions required for feedback to be accepted
- Strengths models – feedback as an indicator of personal strengths/ potential

Key theories in each of these areas will be briefly discussed, highlighting implications for the role and stance of the feedback provider and the recipient-provider relationship.

Table 2-4: Summary implications of key psychological theories of the 'self'.

Perspective	Key theories/authors	Meaning/ purpose of feedback	Providers role	Learning and development	Provider stance
Self-awareness perspectives	• Johari Window (Luft, 1961, 1969)	Return to you of the behaviour you have generated.	Conduit for others' 'hidden' opinions	Enlargement of personal 'arena'.	Voice for 'hidden' material
	• Objective self-awareness theory (Duval and Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975)	The discrepancy between self and own standard	Encourage discrepancy reduction.	Toleration of negative discrepancies	Voice for discrepancy
Self-concept perspectives	• Self-enhancement and self-consistency theories (Swann, 1987) • Implicit theories of self (Dweck, 1999)	Feedback response as an indicator of self-concept	Work with recipient self-deceptions. Encourage feedback-seeking	Toleration of difficult feedback (positive or negative)	Voice for excluded feedback
	• Gestalt psychology (Clarkson, 1999; Perls, 1976)	Feedback response as an indicator of boundary conditions/ health	Developing discrimination to feedback	Development of a 'semi-permeable membrane'.	Guardian of recipient boundary health
Conditions of acceptance perspectives	• Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) • Intentional Change Theory (Boyatzis and Akrivou, 2006))	Conditions of feedback acceptance	Provide autonomy, respect for competence and relatedness	Integration of congruent feedback	Facilitate recipient autonomous motivation
Strengths perspectives	• Positive psychology (Buckingham and Goodall, 2019b; Peterson and Seligman, 2004)	Feedback as an indicator of potential strengths	Diagnose and develop areas of natural strength	Strengths as a source of excellence	Voice for the recipient's strengths

Johari Window

The 'Johari window' model (Luft, 1961, 1969) suggests that our self-knowledge (defined as our behaviours, feelings and motivations) is only ever partial and incomplete. Every individual is likely to have aspects of the self that are unknown to them ('blind spots') but known to others. This model of interpersonal interactions has become highly influential and suggests that self-knowledge can be expanded or changed by two prime mechanisms, receiving feedback or self-disclosure to others. Figure 2-2 below shows a typical depiction of the model. Feedback, in this context, is defined as '*the return to you of the behaviour you have generated*' (Luft, 1969: 116).

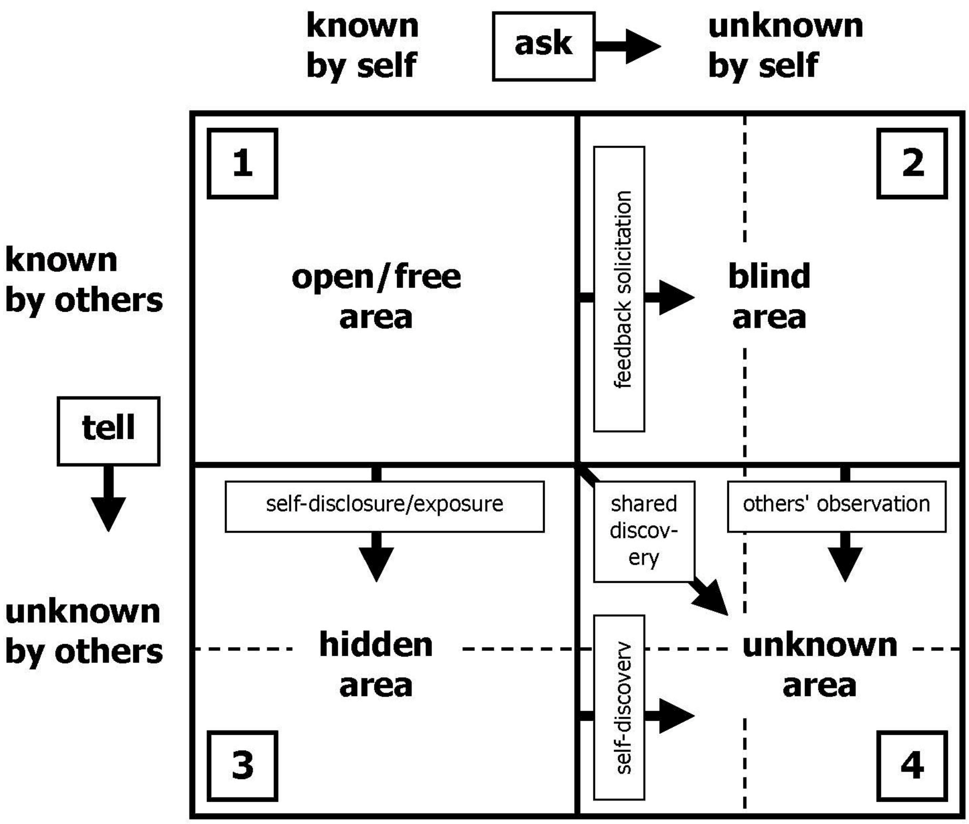

Figure 2-2: The Johari Window (Meyer-Stoll and Ecker, 2013)

Luft (1969) distinguishes between several different forms of feedback. He suggests that personal reactions (defined as information from a providers' hidden area) have significant learning and developmental value but argues that this form of data is often suppressed out of social politeness or distorted in the forms of an interpretation or judgemental reaction. An intermediary, such as a coach, may therefore contribute to a leader's development by providing a conduit for others' reactions and opinions as well as conveying their own experience.

Luft also describes 'forced feedback', when a provider calls attention to something in the recipients' 'blind spot' which may be unwelcome or resisted depending on circumstance. Luft cautions against this potential form of forced exposure, which he also terms 'psychological rape'.

> *"In the individual denial of the forced disclosure is probably the most common reaction. There are other ways of avoiding, ignoring, rationalizing, or otherwise deflecting the disclosure. Sometime the individual may, after considerable experience and growth, look back and recognize the earlier attack-and-denial as the first intimation of new awareness. More often, defences around the troubled feelings become tighter and the emotional issue buried still further*."(Luft, 1969: 36)

The Johari window appears to have something of a 'taken for granted' appeal and has been widely disseminated. However, there appears to be limited empirical support for the model, or indeed critique of it. In a rare example of empirical research, Crino and Rubenfield (1982) unsuccessfully attempted to use the Johari model as a method for measuring changes in self-awareness. However, they found that the model was a useful way of helping people to articulate self-awareness goals.

Objective self-awareness theory

Duval and Wicklund (1972) proposed a theory of 'objective self-awareness' which suggested that individuals divide their attention either toward themselves or toward the environment. Discrepancy feedback is one event that can focus attention inwards, precipitating self-reflection and self-evaluation. Self-awareness is therefore internally referenced against relevant self-standards. Their theory forecasts two possible reactions to self-focused attention, mainly depending on the valence of discrepancy:

> *"If the discrepancy in focus is positive, the person will welcome stimuli that bring on the objective state and will tend to seek out self-focusing circumstances. If the salient discrepancy is negative, there will be an active avoidance of such stimuli, including efforts to create distractions. Further, and only in the case of negative discrepancies, an inescapable objective self-awareness will result in attempted discrepancy reduction" (Wicklund, 1975: 238)*

According to this perspective, positive feedback is associated primarily with positive affective states, whilst negative feedback is associated with varying degrees of negative affect, which provide the motivational force to eliminate the source of discrepancy. So construed, the feedback provider's role is to help the recipient tolerate negative affective states rather than avoid them, or to re-evaluate the self-standards applied.

It is worth noting that 'self-awareness', as defined by Duval and Wicklund (1972), differs from more recent conceptualisations (Goleman, 1998a, 1998b; Goleman et al., 2002) which stress external rather than internal referencing. Self-awareness, according to these later perspectives, therefore, focuses on the differences between how an individual sees themselves and how others perceive them. This 'self-other agreement' definition informs a view that the feedback-providers role is to help an individual close any gaps with external perceptions and legitimises the use of 360º/ multi-rater feedback processes. However, Eurich (2018) argues that developing self-awareness is less straight-forward, involving the reconciliation of both internal and external self-awareness:

> *"The bottom line is that self-awareness isn't one truth. It's a delicate balance of two distinct, even competing, viewpoints*." (Eurich, 2018:8).

Self-consistency versus Self-enhancement Theories

As mentioned, a central concern of the practitioner literature is best practice in delivering negative feedback. However, Social Psychology theorists (Swann, 1987) suggest that the conflation of negative feedback with 'difficult' feedback may be an over-simplification and argue that a more complex combination of competing factors (Table 2-5) determines whether feedback is accepted or rejected, including:

- Existing self-concept – the tendency to see oneself negatively or positively
- Self-consistency motivation – the need to preserve a stable self-view (Swann, 1997; Swann and Read, 1981; 1981b)
- Self-enhancement motivation –the need to increase a sense of self-worth (Brown, 1986; Tesser, 1985)

Table 2-5: Proposed responses to positive and negative feedback

	Need for Self-consistency	**Need for Self-enhancement**
Positive self-concept	Accept positive feedback Reject negative feedback	Accept positive feedback Reject negative feedback
Negative self-concept	Accept negative feedback Reject positive feedback	Accept positive feedback Reject negative feedback

Adapted from Swann and Read (1981) and Swann et al. (1987)

This perspective suggests that rejected feedback is not always 'negative' feedback and that feedback may be used to confirm self-concept rather than challenge it. For example, Maxwell and Bachkirova (2010) suggest that despite the apparently objective nature of 360º/ multi-rater feedback, such assessments may at times perpetuate rather than challenge the existing self-image. So conceived, the role of the feedback provider is to ensure that the recipient hears and integrates the part of the feedback message that is most likely to be excluded.

Implicit theories of self

Dweck's 'Implicit theory of self' (Dweck, 1999; Dweck et al., 1995; Dweck and Leggett, 1988) similarly predicts how individuals may react to feedback, based on their self-concept. Dweck identifies individuals as having either a 'fixed' or 'growth' mindset and predicts different responses to criticism and praise accordingly.

Dweck's theories also suggest different responses to feedback aimed at the 'self' rather than at the task performed. For example, Dweck suggests that for some people, person-oriented feedback instils a sense of contingent self-worth, where people only feel worthy when they are succeeding. She purports that this leads others to avoid giving negative feedback for fear of damaging self-esteem, and a potentially harmful overuse of praise.

> *"If you learn from person praise that success means you're a good or able person, you also seem to learn that failure means you're a bad or inept person. If you learn from praise that your good performance merits wholesale pride, you also seem to learn that poor performance merits shame." (Dweck, 1999:114)*

Dweck further argues that a growth mindset is fostered by honest criticism and praise, as long as it targeted on the process or strategy deployed rather than on the person. This perspective implies that feedback providers may need to distinguish between different types of 'mindset' and ensure careful targeting of feedback to avoid damaging effects.

Gestalt 'boundary conditions'

Gestalt psychology has much to say about how individuals respond to feedback, with a focus on the processes of deflection or introjection (Perls et al., 1951). Chronic or habitual deflection of external feedback is seen as leaving an individual out of touch with their environment, resulting in individuals meeting their environment with fixed ways of relating and responding:

> *"A person who habitually deflects does not use his or her energy in an effective way to get feedback from self, others or the environment. Perhaps no criticism can 'get through' but neither can appreciation or love." (Clarkson, 1999: 57)*

In contrast, introjection represents acceptance of information from the environment without discrimination or examination. Chronic introjection, therefore, prevents the individual from forming a healthy sense of self (Clarkson, 1999; Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993) by privileging the views of others over our own:

> *"[Introjection]…makes us something like a house so jam packed with other people's possessions that there is no room for the owner's property. It turns us into waste baskets of extraneous and irrelevant information"* (Perls, 1976: 34)

Accordingly, a 'healthy' adaptive relationship to feedback, is seen as where feedback is neither automatically rejected nor accepted, but where discrimination and discernment are applied. Development in this context, therefore, represents the ability to develop such discrimination, neither privileging the internal view of self or the external messages of the environment (Figure 2-3). So construed, the feedback provider needs to work with the recipient's ability to discriminate feedback, challenging them to develop a 'semi-permeable' boundary between themselves and their environment.

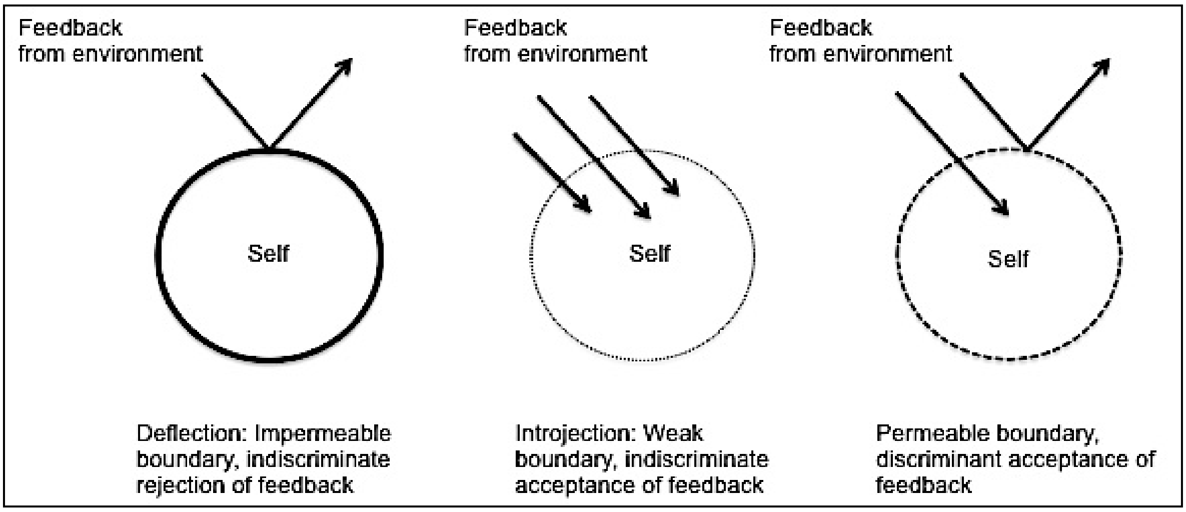

Figure 2-3: Feedback as a boundary disturbance

Extrinsic vs Intrinsic motivations

While the above psychological theories give various constructions on feedback, little has been written on the general conditions between provider and recipient that might lead to feedback acceptance or rejection. In their work on self-determination theory, Ryan and Deci (2000) propose a general theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations which suggests a range of possible responses (Figure 2-4) to external stimuli such as feedback from another. They propose that while external feedback must be by definition, an extrinsic motivator, this does not necessarily imply low acceptance. Rather they suggest that a spectrum of extrinsic motivation exists ranging from low agreement (e.g. compliance to external regulation) to higher levels of acceptance, endorsement and congruence (integration of feedback into the self).

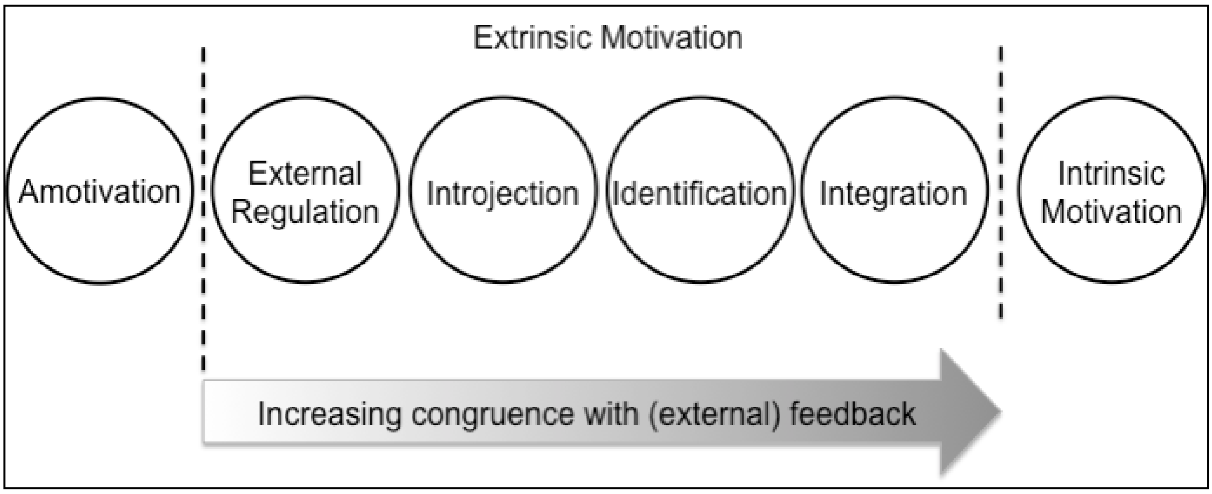

Figure 2-4: Taxonomy of human motivation related to feedback (Adapted from Ryan and Deci, 2000)

Ryan & Deci (2000) suggest that higher levels of acceptance can be achieved under particular conditions of autonomy, respect for competence and relatedness. Spence and Deci (2013) suggest that the coach's role is to facilitate autonomous motivation by, for example acknowledging the recipient's perspective, encouraging self-initiation and minimising controlling language, within a context of a warm, empathic and non-judgmental relationship.

Positive psychology perspectives

Positive psychology (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) informs a relatively new perspective on feedback and feedback-giving. This view suggests that critical/negative feedback, far from informing and spurring development, precipitates strong adverse reactions which inhibits and impairs the possibility of learning and development (Boyatzis and McKee, 2011). Personal growth and development, so construed, comes from attention to, and understanding of individual strengths and their practical application:

> *"Learning rests on our grasp of what we're doing well, not on what we're doing poorly, and certainly not on someone else's sense of what we're doing poorly. … we learn most when someone else pays attention to what's working within us and asks us to cultivate it intelligently." (Buckingham and Goodall, 2019a: 6)*

Informed by this perspective, coaches and development professionals would therefore pay greater attention to a leader's strengths as a strategy for facilitating growth. Critical feedback, whilst seen as necessary in remedial situations, is not seen as a means of encouraging development. However, it is noting that some authors (O'Malley and Gregory, 2011) suggest that critical feedback should not be avoided altogether. Instead, they suggest that techniques informed by positive psychology (mindfulness, empathy, appreciative inquiry) can play a valuable part in countering adverse affective reactions and in building greater resilience to critical feedback. To date, these ideas have yet to be thoroughly tested empirically and offers another avenue for potential research.

2.3.3 Feedback theories and feedback theories for coaching

While many theories implicitly consider and include the role of feedback, there are still relatively few conceptualisations where it is the explicit central concern. To date, relatively few theories of feedback have been created for the specific context of coaching and other forms of developmental relationships. However, recent years have seen the emergence of several new conceptualisations for this arena. Table 2-6 below summarises key theories with a specific focus on the role of feedback, noting conceptualisations aimed specifically at the coaching world.

Table 2-6: Theoretical conceptualisation of feedback and feedback in coaching.

Perspective	Authors	Source	Contribution
General theories of Feedback	Ilgen et al. (1979)	Literature review of feedback effects	Aspects of feedback that influences how it is perceived, accepted, and impacts how recipient respond to it
	Kluger and DeNisi (1996) (Feedback intervention theory)	Meta-analysis of feedback effects	Control and Goal setting theories applied as a process of self-regulation. Proposes a conceptual hierarchy of feedback discrepancy (self, task motivation and task learning)
	London and Smither (2002)	Conceptual/ Literature review	A conceptualisation of feedback as a 3-stage process model. Proposes of feedback 'orientation' and feedback 'culture' as mediating variables.
	Hattie and Timperley (2007)	Meta-analysis of feedback effects	Goal setting theories applied to the process of learning. Proposes a conceptual hierarchy of feedback discrepancy (task, process, self-regulation, self)
Feedback theory for coaching contexts	Joo (2005)	Meta-analysis of coaching literature	A conceptual framework for successful executive coaching, featuring feedback receptivity as a key element
	Gregory et al. (2008)	Builds on London and Smither (2002) and Joo (2005)	A conceptualisation of feedback as a 5-stage process model. Proposes coach characteristics, feedback orientation, organisations feedback environment and support as mediating variables
	De Villiers (2013)	Literature review	Proposes a framework of 5 constructs and seven principles that inform constructive feedback delivery (Situation, manageable, specific, meaningful, timely, relevant and reliable)

Three broad types of conceptualisation are apparent. Firstly, theories which purport a conceptual hierarchy of feedback discrepancies (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996), with feedback impacting at different levels in differing ways. Secondly, models of the conditions and factors which are deemed to determine feedback effects, including recipient receptivity to feedback. (De Villiers, 2013; Ilgen et al., 1979; Joo, 2005). Lastly, feedback process models which articulate proposed stages of the feedback dialogue. (Gregory et al., 2008; London and Smither, 2002). It is worth noting that these conceptualisations are not directly based on original empirical research but derived from meta-analyses of existing literature.

2.4 Summary of the literature

The chapter has given an overview of the empirical, practitioner and theoretical literature, regarding the use of developmental feedback for leader development. While the empirical literature is extensive, complex and multi-disciplinary, the majority of the studies in this area have been quantitative, focussing primarily on the effects of task performance feedback. These studies suggest that the effects of such feedback are not always positive or predictable and that responses are highly individualised. Reasons for these variable responses are still not well understood, and the lived experience of feedback participants remains relatively unexplored.

More recent work has considered feedback used for developmental purposes. The emergence of new tools such as 360º/ multi-rater feedback and psychometric assessments has provided an impetus for further research, and their use in combination with coaching has become a central area in leadership development studies. Again, these studies are primarily quantitative and are often inconclusive in determining direct causal effects. Recipient responses to such tools have been inconsistent, apparently impacted by a multiplicity of factors. Determinants of feedback receptivity have, therefore become an area of considerable interest; however, studies to date do not consider recipients perspectives in any depth. This study, therefore, contributes to the field by providing detailed accounts of recipient leaders experience of developmental feedback. The study affords the opportunity to investigate the types of feedback leaders consider as memorable and the conditions they perceive as impacting their receptivity and response.

It is apparent from the practitioner literature that while many consider feedback as central to their work as a coach, there is a limited critical discussion within the mainstream debate. Surprisingly, considering the scale of the industry, little is known about feedback-giving from the perspective of those who provide it to leaders. This study allows exploring of feedback provider experiences and a better understanding of the attitudes, assumptions and theoretical perspectives that inform their practice.

Theoretically, conceptual development in the area is at a relatively early stage. Few theories of feedback in the context of leader development and coaching have been developed and are not underpinned directly by supporting empirical study. This study, therefore, contributes directly to these areas of theoretical debate and the development of frameworks to support practice.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter summarises the philosophical underpinnings to this study (section 3.1), demonstrating how my research ‘axiology’ in combination with the research questions of interest, were used to inform methodological choices, and select final methods employed. The chapter details the methods enacted (section 3.2) to select research participants, collect and analyse data. Potential ethical risks are outlined (section 3.3), along with the steps taken to manage and mitigate these. The quality criteria applied to the study are described (section 3.4), and an overview is given of the strategies employed to ensure the quality of research products. The chapter concludes with a description and rationale for the structure and presentation of findings presented in Chapters 4-6 (section 3.5).

3.1 Philosophical Underpinning

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't." (Hamlet, Act II, Scene II)

Choice of research philosophy is of both theoretical and practical importance to the researcher and is part of making the case that the research approach is both coherent and conceptually sound. However, this is not necessarily an easy process as the (social) research methods field is characterised by high levels of discussion, debate and disagreement about the relative merits of different approaches and the commensurability of methods. As Bryant (2017) points out, even at a basic definitional level, there is considerable inconsistency across texts in the use of core terms. Confusion is compounded by the (necessary) evolution of research methods over time with adherents of particular versions making claims for the relative strengths of their stance or approach. I shall, therefore, pick my way through this ‘madness’ and provide a rationale for my particular research stance as a coherent way of studying my research question(s).

To make this case, I start by giving a short reflexive account of my personal research ‘axiology’ as this colours, I believe, my approach to research. I will consider the nature of my research question(s) as this drives both practical choices of methods and epistemological stance. I will then consider my choice of research philosophy, including issues of research paradigm and epistemology. Flowing from these choices are methodological implications, including the position and stance of the researcher, the kinds of research products made possible and the appropriate means of assessing the ‘quality’ of these outputs. Final method choices, therefore, aim to balance the needs of the particular research question, the researcher’s theoretical stance along with practical constraints of access and resource (Figure 3-1). Section 3.2 below outlines the details of the final enacted method, a modified version of Grounded Theory methods, informed by pragmatism and constructivist perspectives.

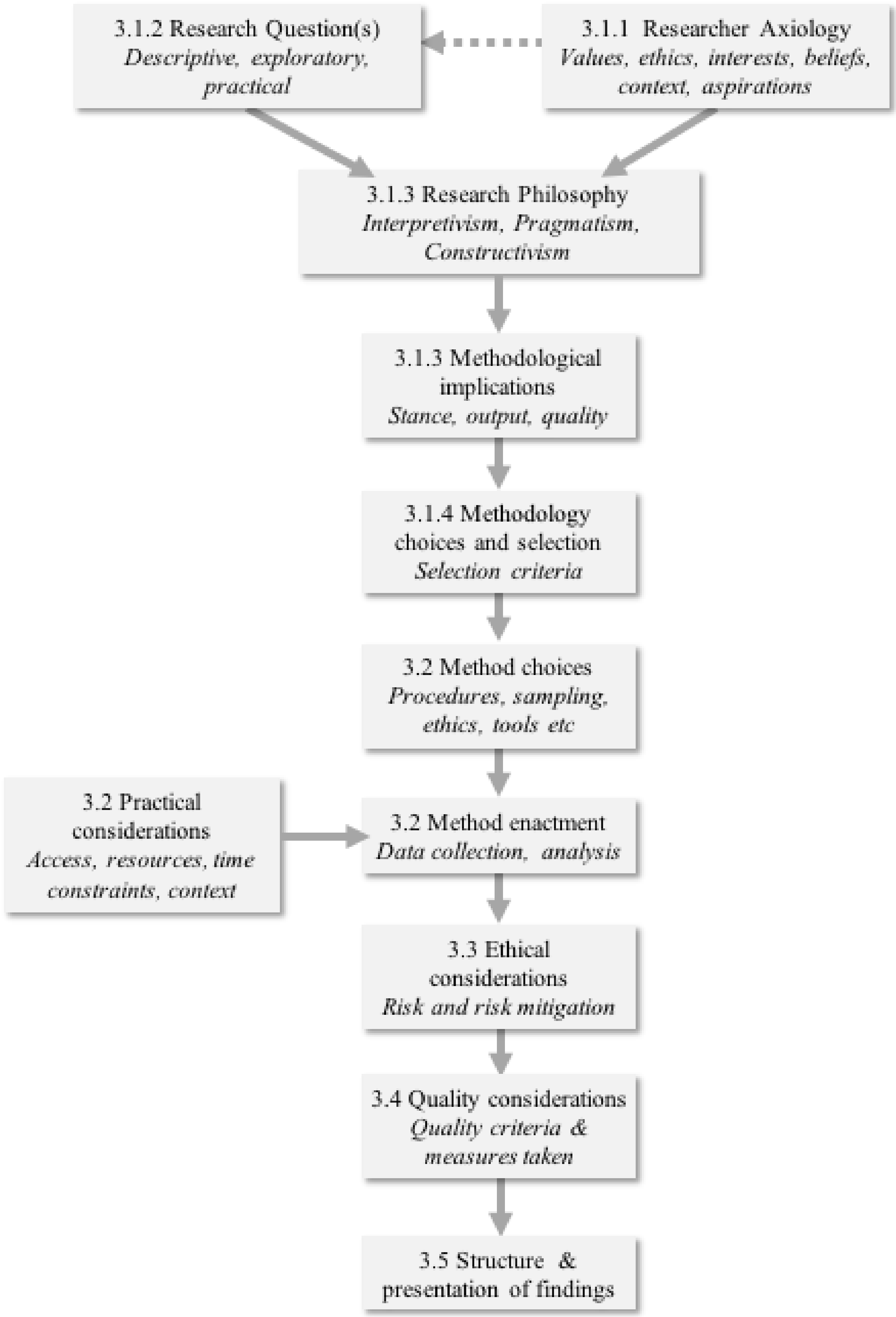

Figure 3-1: 'Flow' of research rationale

3.1.1 Researcher ‘axiology’ – values, beliefs and assumptions

Chapter One above outlined my interest and experience of my chosen topic. In that chapter, I sought to describe my experiences of using feedback in leadership development contexts. Similarly, in this chapter I aim to be transparent about myself as a researcher, situating this study in the context of my experiences of research and the values/beliefs and potential biases I bring to the research process (Attia and Edge, 2017). This desire for full transparency ‘betrays’ my Constructivist/ Interpretivist leanings. I believe no study exists independent of the researcher’s influence and that the research process is itself a construct created between the researcher, their engagement with their study, and the norms of the research community they inhabit (Martela, 2015).

Professionally I have had multiple experiences of designing studies in response to a variety of research interests and reporting and defending resulting conclusions. My first research encounters heavily favoured Positivist/Objectivist traditions informed by studying Operations Research and Statistics at Master’s level. I learnt the value of the hypothetico-deductive method in addressing research questions aimed at, for example, providing statistical verification of theory and prediction of cause and effect. However, I also came to appreciate the limitations of such methods particularly in exploring and describing questions of human experiencing or addressing issues of complexity and non-linear behaviour (Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Stacey, 1996).

I was first introduced to Constructivist/ Interpretivist perspectives whilst studying for the MA in Coaching and Mentoring Practice at Oxford Brookes University, which afforded my first formal opportunity to apply qualitative methods as part of my MA dissertation (Maxwell, 2009). This experience gave me an appreciation of the rich and nuanced output possible from a qualitative study, which would be otherwise inaccessible without such methods. It also illuminated the individually and socially constructed nature of 'reality' amongst participants, and I increasingly came to embrace a Constructivist perspective.

My background and training, therefore, equip me as a qualitative and quantitative researcher. I hold a pragmatic belief that the particularities of a research question should primarily drive the research approach and that research methods drawn from qualitative and quantitative traditions can be mixed if congruently and coherently applied. Further, I have come to believe that there is no such thing as the 'perfect' method. Each research strategy has its strengths and limitations, and the final choice of method may be the 'least worst', a compromise between theoretical considerations and practical realities. The researcher should, therefore, be able to defend their choices, mitigating where possible for shortcomings, and be open and honest about the (inevitable) limitations of their approach and the claims they can make for their findings. The ability to assess the quality of output is important; however, the criteria for judging output, should I believe, be particular to the method chosen (Crotty, 1998; Willig, 2001).

My research experiences have also left me with some unresolved questions and tensions. For example, I highly value 'rigour' in the sense of applying systematic approaches to all parts of the research process. However, I also believe that research is, in part, an improvisational process not a 'recipe', with necessary adaptations and compromises made to changing circumstances. Further, while I agree that no research exists outside the influence of the researcher my latent Positivist self is still concerned with objectivity, particularly regarding over-interpretation or distortion of data, or the forced imposition of 'meaning' by the researcher (Paley, 2017). Finally, while I recognise that research products pertain to specific contexts, I aspire that my research should be extensible beyond these contexts and contribute to improving practice and knowledge in the field of leadership development and leadership coaching.

3.1.2 Nature of the research question

As stated above, I believe that the nature of the research question should be a primary determinant of the research approach. As outlined in Chapter One, my research interest is in understanding how feedback participants (providers and recipients) construct the process of feedback and how recipients subsequently act upon it. More specifically, I am interested in questions of:

- Context – what are the conditions of feedback giving, for example, the relationship between parties, mutual and organisational expectations of participants, power and influence at play, types of feedback in use. How might these conditions influence acceptance or rejection of feedback or subsequent action?
- Phenomenological experience – how do feedback participants experience feedback conversations? What are participant reactions to giving/ receiving feedback? How do participants articulate these? What patterns are apparent between participants and between participant groups?
- Sensemaking - how do participants make sense of what they are doing and experiencing within their context? How do these constructions lead to or inhibit action on feedback? How is an individual's sense of self impacted as a result of receiving personally directed feedback on their attributes and abilities as a leader? Do participants construe a revised sense of self and if so, how?

- Consequent action and outcomes- what are the subsequent consequences or actions resulting from feedback provision? How do participants construe action or inaction? What sort of changes do they make? How might a better understanding of the feedback process support better practice in the field?

While some of the above questions could be answered within a Positivist/Objectivist frame, I do not seek to test or verify existent theories of feedback. Instead I seek to collect rich descriptions of experiences and generate plausible explanations which might be useful to others in guiding practice. My aspirations for this study are therefore descriptive, exploratory and practical. Qualitative data and inductive methods are likely to be more suitable in elucidating the meanings of participants; however, that does not preclude the use of quantitative data as a possible means of elaborating and contextualising participant accounts.

3.1.3 Research philosophy and methodological implications

According to some authors (Bryman, 2008; Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Cameron and Miller, 2007), the social science researcher has, until recently, faced a stark binary choice between two incompatible epistemological paradigms: Positivism/ Objectivism (often conflated with quantitative methods) versus Interpretivism/ Constructivism (often conflated with qualitative methods). On one side:

> *"Quantitative purists maintain that social science inquiry should be objective. That is, time- and context-free generalisations are desirable and possible and real causes of social scientific outcomes can be determined reliably and validity. According to this school of thought...researchers should eliminate their biases, remain emotionally*

> *detached and uninvolved with the objects of their study and test or empirically justify their stated hypotheses." (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004: 14)*

On the other side:

> *"Qualitative purists reject positivism. They argue for the superiority of constructivism, idealism, relativism, humanism, hermeneutics and, sometimes, postmodernism. These purists contend that multiple realities abound, that time- and context-free generalizations are neither desirable nor possible, that research is value-bound, that it is impossible to differentiate fully causes and effects, that logic flows from the specific to the general and that knower and known cannot be separated because the subjective knower is the only source of reality." (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004: 14)*

This 'incompatibilist' position (Guba, 1990; Guba and Lincoln, 1998, 2008) therefore forces the researcher to choose methods based on their epistemological position rather than the needs of the particular research question and restricts the options open to an investigator. Thus, for example, Guba (1990: 81) states "*accommodation between paradigms is impossible… we are led to vastly diverse, disparate and totally antithetical ends*".

In more recent times, this construction of research choices in terms of incompatible paradigms has been countered by those offering a 'compatibilist' perspective (Howe, 1988, 1992; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998), underpinned by a Pragmatic philosophic stance (Feilzer, 2009; Martela, 2015; Morgan, 2014). For the compatibilists, both quantitative and qualitative methods have a useful place and can be combined in ways that make the most sense in answering a particular research question. Thus methodological choices are determined primarily in terms of ‘what works’, and Morgan (2014: 1045) argues :

> *“… that pragmatism can serve as a philosophical program for social research, regardless of whether that research uses qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods.”*

The Pragmatic perspective sets asides many epistemological concerns, providing a middle way, philosophically and methodologically. This stance rejects many traditional dualisms (e.g. subjectivism vs objectivism, facts vs values, individual vs society), and focuses on the practical consequences of choices rather than the nature of causation. Pragmatism rejects the realism/ antirealism debate recognising both the existence of a physical world as well as a social and psychological world that includes language, culture, human institutions and subjective thoughts. Knowledge is viewed as both constructed *and* based on the reality of the world we inhabit and experience. Inductive, deductive and abductive logic are all permissible forms of inquiry, with the research question and ‘ends-in-view’ (Martela, 2015) ultimately guiding the final choice of methods (Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004: 17-18). According to this position, qualitative and quantitative methods may, therefore, be combined productively (Cameron and Miller, 2007; Feilzer, 2009; Morgan, 2007; Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2012)

While sharing some similar ground with Critical Realists (Bhaskar, 1998), pragmatically informed researchers aim to provide ‘warranted guidance’ for others rather than accurate theories of underlying structures and mechanisms:

> *“While the overall aim of science in critical realism is still to ‘explain events and processes’, pragmatism,…sees the role of science as one of serving human purposes.*

Science in pragmatism is accordingly progressing not towards theories that better correspond to some underlying reality, but rather into theories that allow human beings to have more control over the outcomes of their lives.” (Martela, 2015:552)

Pragmatists, therefore, define the quality of research products according to their utility and rather than their ‘truthfulness’ or ‘accuracy’. A theory that informs practice is therefore endorsed and valued. However, research products (‘knowledge’) are recognised as co-constructed, tentative and fallibilistic (Martela, 2015). In terms of methodological considerations, the stance of the researcher is as an active interpreter of accounts, recognising both the researcher’s involvement, subjectivity and the interactive engagement of the researcher and researched

Pragmatism is of course, not without its critics. For example, Burke Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) query definitions of ‘utility’ and ‘workability’ as criteria of quality and criticise failures to identify research ‘consumers’. ‘Incompatabilists’ (Hammersley, 2002; Yanchar and Williams, 2006) also argue that Pragmatism may be used as an avoidance of ethical and philosophical debates and a form of methodological ‘eclecticism’. I would argue, however, that a Pragmatic perspective does not negate the need to demonstrate theoretical and practical coherence in research design.

I, therefore, argue that a Pragmatic perspective is an appropriate over-arching philosophy to guide my study. This perspective fits both with my personal experiences and stance as a mixed-methods practitioner whilst allowing me to address the multiple dimensions of my research questions via a variety of means. It also allows me to potentially realise ambitions to inform practice by allowing for potential extensibility of findings to broader contexts.

However, I would wish to qualify Pragmatism epistemologically with a Constructivist ‘lens’. Table 3-1 below (Martela, 2015: 548) compares Constructivist and Pragmatic research perspectives and shows that in many ways, these two perspectives are compatible and potentially mutually compensatory.

Table 3-1: Constructivist vs Pragmatic research perspectives

Perspective	**Constructivist**	**Pragmatic**
Epistemology	Interpretive relativism	Falabalistic instrumentalism
Research aim	Understanding different perspectives	Provide warranted guidance
Researchers stance	Active interpreter	Active interpreter
Standards for comparison	No generally accepted standards	Capability for warranted guidance/utility
Methods	Historically contextual Inductive	Historically contextual Abductive
Data	Favours qualitative data	Can combine qualitative and quantitative data

Source: Adapted from Martela (2015: 548)

3.1.4 Methodology choices and selection process

As outlined above, final methodology selection needs to form a coherent response to the chosen philosophic perspective, nature of the research question(s), practical constraints and opportunities as well as the ambitions, values and beliefs of the researcher. This section will make a case for the selection of a pragmatically informed Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, (CGT) as articulated by Charmaz (2014) and Bryant (2017) as an appropriate approach to studying this particular research topic.

Methods selection/ deselection

Based on the considerations articulated above, seven selection criteria were evolved and used to choose between methodologies:

- (1) Fit with research questions (section 3.1.2). To what extent does a methodology permit i) contextuality, enable consideration of ii) phenomenological experiencing and iii) cognitive constructions of lived accounts, and i) consider practical consequences and subsequent actions?
- Fit with methodological concerns (section 3.1.3), i.e.:
    - (2) Recognition of involved and non-objective researcher whilst foregrounding the 'voice of the data'.
    - (3) Provides clear and relevant quality criteria for assessing research products
    - (4) Provides a rigorous, coherent and systematic approach to research design yet allows for flexibility in methods
- Fit with researcher aspirations/ axiology (section 3.1.1):
    - (5) Capable of generating theory/ explanations/ models
    - (6) Capable of research products that inform practitioners
- (7) Fit with chosen philosophic stance (Constructivist/Pragmatist) (section 3.1.3)

The following methodologies were considered less suitable in terms of immediate fit with the research question(s) (criteria 1).

- Discourse analysis (Billig, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992) focuses mainly on the nature and use of language in social interaction which does not fit my research interests. While I recognise that all social interaction, including the exchange of feedback, is conducted through language, I am less interested in speech patterns and acts than the meaning conveyed.

- Case study methodologies (Bromley, 1986; Hamel, 1993; Yin, 1994) focus particularly on the detailed and accurate description of contexts. While I recognise that my study situates in a particular organisational context, this is not the prime focus of the study. Case study methodologies also tend to assume an objective stance for the researcher, eliminating it on criteria 2.

Of the remaining methodologies, the following were eliminated for the following reasons:

- Phenomenological analysis (e.g. IPA) emphasises the lived experience of participants, focusing, typically, on the idiographic subjectivity of a few research participants (Smith, 2004; Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Smith and Osborn, 2008). I rejected this on the grounds of its potential emphasis on generating descriptive accounts (albeit ‘rich’ in texture and detail) given my broader aspirations to inform practice by model/ theory building (criteria 5). Phenomenological analysis also claims limited generalisation of accounts from small sample groups/ single individuals (criteria 6). I also found the position of the researcher somewhat problematic given some versions of phenomenological analysis claim this can be managed through ‘bracketing’ of assumptions (Moustakas, 1994) and other reflexive practices (criteria 2). Some authors (Paley, 2017) attack phenomenological methods for lack of systematic approach (criteria 4) and suggest that the researcher’s influence, in some studies, results in over-interpretation and potential distortion of participant’s meaning-making to fit their pre-conceived theories and constructs.

- Thematic analysis According to Guest et al. (2012), thematic analysis has many practical advantages, including the ability to build rigour into the research process (criteria 4). It can also build theoretical models (criteria 5) and finding solutions to real-world problems in a wide variety of contexts (criteria 6). However, from an epistemological point of view, the approach appears to lack clarity and risks incoherently mixing methods (criteria 3). For example, Guest et al. (2012) describe thematic analysis in the following way:

  "Applied thematic analysis as we define it comprises a bit of everything – grounded theory, positivism, interpretivism and phenomenology – synthesized into one methodological framework." Guest et al. (2012: 15)

  While this may be consistent with a Pragmatic perspective (criteria 7), it makes it difficult to defend to audiences who care about coherence and compatibility.

Having eliminated a range of potential methods, Grounded theory (GT) remains. This methodology can be used to construct a theory from empirical qualitative data (criteria 5) rigorously and systematically (criteria 4). It also has developed criteria for evaluating research products (criteria 3) and emphasises the usability/ workability of research products (criteria 6). However, from an epistemological perspective, variants of GT sit within Objectivist and Constructivist perspectives, taking a different stance on the position of the researcher (criteria 2 and 7).

Objectivist vs Constructivist Grounded Theory

The Grounded Theory (GT) methodology, created in the 1960s, was the combined efforts of two paradigmatically diverse individuals, Glaser and Strauss (Bryant, 2017). Their methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1965, 1967, 1968) provided a credible and rigorous approach to questions of human experiencing. Their approach challenged:

> *"Beliefs that qualitative methods were impressionistic and unsystematic… prevailing views of qualitative research only as a precursor to quantitative work… suppositions that qualitative research should be judged by the same tenets as quantitative research... [and] assumptions that qualitative research could not generate theory." (Charmaz, 2014: 8).*

However, critics of classic GT (Charmaz, 2000) have characterised it as an Objectivist/ Positivist methodology arguing that it attempts to create context-free conceptualisations, viewing the researcher as 'objective' in the research process. Indeed Glaser (1992) saw the tools and processes of Objectivist Grounded Theory (OGT) as methods of counteracting any potential bias or influence by the researcher. Nevertheless, it must be stated that there are counter-criticisms of GT as a Constructivist methodology. For example, Glaser (2002) and others (Damallis, 2007), see Charmaz's CGT version as epistemologically inconsistent with the original formulation. In this respect, I found Bryant's (2017) perspectives useful to return to 'first principles' and cut through the debate to find a pragmatically workable solution.

Table 3-2 below summarises a comparison of Objectivist Grounded Theory and Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) (Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2008a, 2008b). OGT, as conceptualised in this manner, therefore, fails to meet criteria 1, 2 and 7 articulated above.

Table 3-2: Comparison of Objectivist and Constructivist Grounded Theory

	Objectivist Grounded Theory	Constructivist Grounded Theory
Influences	• Positivist • Realist	• Interpretivist • Social constructionism • Pragmatism • Symbolic interactionism
Foundational Assumptions	• Assumes an external reality • Assumes discovery of data • Assumes conceptualizations emerge from data analysis • Views representation of data as unproblematic • Assumes the neutrality, passivity and authority of the researcher	• Assumes multiple realities • Assumes mutual construction of data through interaction • Assumes researcher constructs categories • Views representation of data as problematic, relativistic, situational and partial • Assumes the researchers' values, priorities, positions and actions affect views
Objectives	• Aims to achieve context-free generalisations • Aims for parsimonious, abstract conceptualisations that transcend historical and situational contexts • Aims to create a theory that fits, works, has relevance and is modifiable (Glaser)	• Views generalisations as partial, conditional and situated in time, space, positions, action and interaction • Aims for an interpretive understanding of historically situated data • Specifies the range of variation • Aims to create a theory that has credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness
Implications for data analysis	• Views data analysis as an objective process • Sees emergent categories as forming the analysis • Sees reflexivity as one possible data source • Gives priority to researcher's analytic categories and voice	• Acknowledges subjectivities throughout the data analysis • Views co-constructed data as beginning the analytic direction • Engages in reflexivity through the research process • Seeks and (re)represents the participant's views and voices as integral to the analysis.

Source: Adapted from Charmaz (2014: 234-240)

Pragmatically informed Constructivist Grounded Theory.

Bryant (2009, 2017) argues that pragmatic influences were seeded at the inception of GT, through Strauss and his teachers at the Chicago School of Sociology, but that these influences have been unrecognised and underplayed. Indeed, as originally formulated by Charmaz (2006), CGT whilst explicitly taking a Constructivist 'turn', made only passing reference to the Pragmatist perspective as an underpinning philosophy. However, in the second edition (Charmaz, 2014), the place of pragmatism was clearly and fully articulated, particularly referencing Symbolic Interactionism as a theoretical perspective that :

> *"... offers grounded theorists an open-ended theoretical perspective that can inform grounded theory studies. Researchers may draw upon symbolic interactionism's major strength of combining theory and method in a coherent, unified whole without forcing their data and their ideas into a prescribed set of concepts. Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory methods fit, complement and can advance each other." (Charmaz, 2014: 277).*

In a similar vein, Bryant further evolves (2009, 2017) a grounded theory method, offering:

> *"...An account of the method, largely anchored in the constructivist camp [and]... a set of heuristics that promote grounded theorizing of the Pragmatic kind." (Bryant, 2017: xi).*

A Pragmatic perspective (Martela, 2015; Morgan, 2007, 2014) potentially modifies Constructivist versions of GT in the following ways:

- Supports the ability to both describe participant experience and conceptualise from it (criteria 1)

- Emphasises the combination of beliefs, actions and consequences as well as phenomenological experience (criteria 1)
- Sets the researcher within the norms of the community of research and recognises the iteration between that community and the lone researcher (e.g. with research supervisors) (criteria 2)
- Regards the research process as provisional and contingent. (criteria 3)
- Provides tools to assess what constitutes a 'good' interpretation of data (criteria 3)
- Emphasises practical utility of research products (criteria 5 and 6)
- Evaluates research products in terms of their ability to solve practical, real-world problems or serve as guidance for practitioners (criteria 6)
- Couches outputs as provisional 'warranted assertions' which may be extensible to other contexts if found to be repeatedly effective (criteria 6)
- Begins with real-world problems as a starting point and attempts to keep these 'ends-in-view' throughout the whole process (criteria 6)
- Avoids potential extremes of relativist (and realist) position (criteria 7)
- Employs abduction rather than induction. Abduction aims to '*arrive at the best available explanation taking all into account – one's observations, one's pre-understanding, and any other material available such as previous theoretical explanations of the phenomenon*' (Martela, 2015:248) (criteria 7)
- Views experiencing as an '*active process of exploration within an embodied stream of experiencing in which the cognitive dimensions are just one par*t' (Martela, 2015:539) (criteria 7)

These modifications to CGT, therefore, appear epistemologically congruent and appear to fit with my seven selection criteria. This framework and stance are, therefore, adopted as a coherent approach to investigating my research questions.

3.2 Overview of Methods

In this section gives an overview of the research design and the methods used to identify and select participants, collect and analyse data. Figure 3-2 below summarises, at a high level, the overall research design. Broadly the work fell into three phases, described in detail in the following sections:

- Phase 1:Preparation phase, including identification of the study organisation, and an initial qualitative survey of a cross-section of leaders in the study organisation (Section 3.2.1)
- Phase 2: Interview phase (Section 3.2.2)
- Phase 3: Analysis and interpretation phase (Section 3.2.3)

3.2.1 Phase 1: Preparation and initial data collection

Identifying the study context

As outlined in section 3.1.2 above, the study sought to explore how feedback participants (recipient leaders and legitimised providers) experienced and construed developmental feedback conversations and understand how recipients subsequently acted upon them. It was, therefore, essential to situate the study in an organisation which used a variety of feedback tools/ mechanisms to facilitate leadership development. That organisation also needed to deploy both internal (HR professionals) and external coaches to deliver that feedback to their leaders.

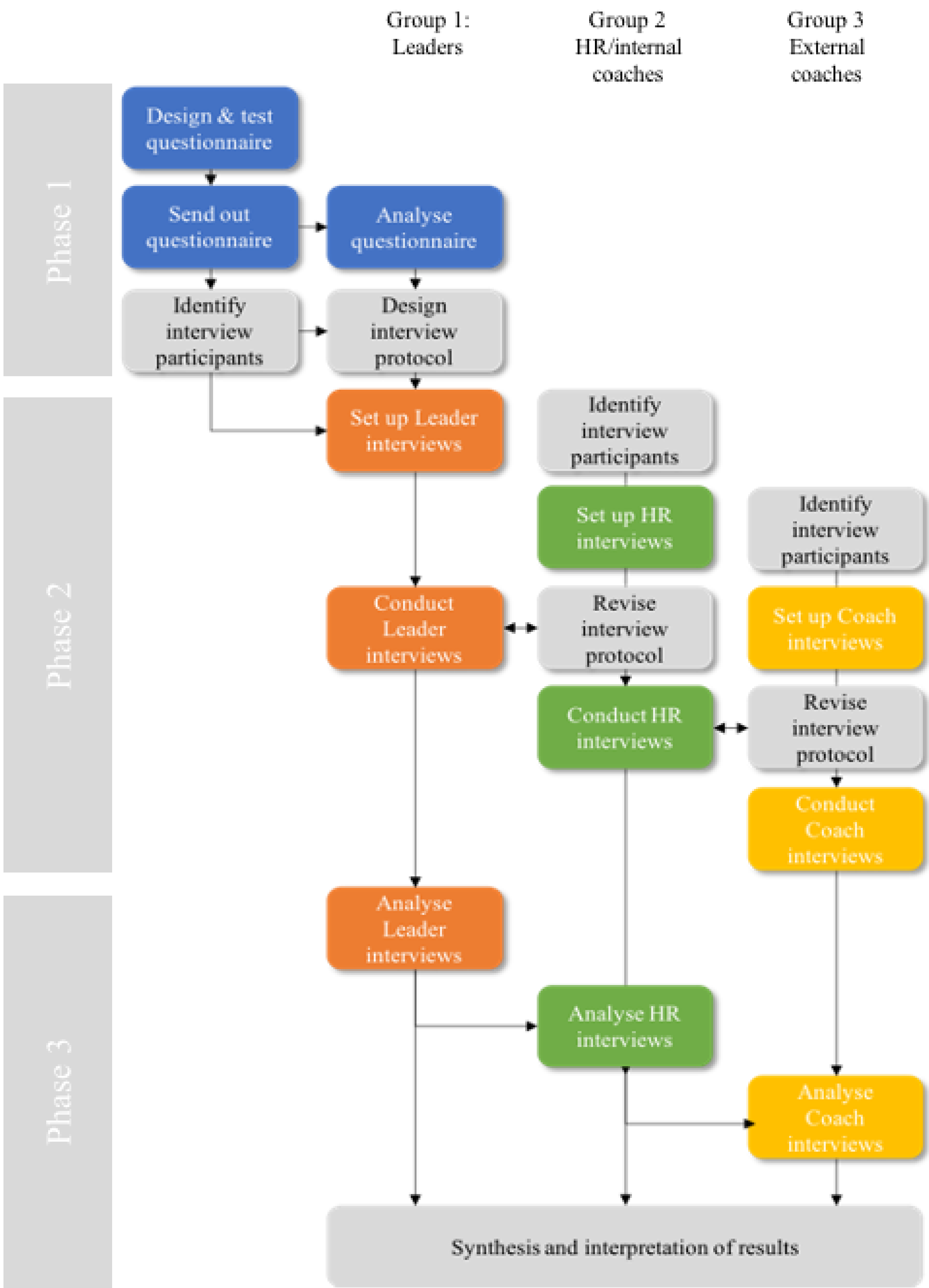

Figure 3-2: Schematic of the overall research process

Specifically, the study required access to three types of participant groups:

1) Senior leaders working with experience of receiving developmental feedback,
2) HR professionals and internal coaches with experience of giving developmental feedback to that leadership group, and
3) External coaches who worked with the study organisation, with experience of giving developmental feedback to its senior leaders.

The study organisation (XYZ Plc.) fitted these criteria and was willing to provide access to its personnel and facilitate access to its external coach suppliers. The organisation used a variety of tools and mechanisms to develop its leaders, within the context of its overall ‘leadership development framework’ (see section 1.5: Organisational context to the study). For this study, recent past attendees of its flagship leadership development programme were identified as suitable potential participants. This programme was intended for its most senior leadership population below executive grade who were considered likely to progress in the organisation. This very senior group, therefore, had exposure to a wide variety of developmental feedback, as a result of attending the programme and during their career. This feedback had been delivered to them by both internal and external coaches, as well as through line relationships.

Initial quantitative data collection and analysis

As an initial step, a short ‘SurveyMonkey’ questionnaire was designed (See Appendix 1), targeting the identified leadership group. The purpose of this questionnaire was three-fold:

i. To gather data regarding the research questions in order to inform the design of subsequent interviews,
ii. To identify and attract potential leaders to participate in the interview phase,

iii. To add richness to the qualitative interview data.

In order to be consistent with the tenets of Grounded Theory, it is worth noting that the collection of questionnaire data was not designed to verify any pre-existing theory or indeed generate hypotheses. Analysis of this information was therefore confined to descriptive rather than inferential statistics (see section 4.1), and points of comparison with the interview data.

The design of the questionnaire was informed by the research questions and immersion in the feedback literature. In particular, the survey focused respondents on memorable (rather than typical) feedback instances and consequent changes, as this was felt more likely to elicit recall of impactful or meaningful feedback conversations. Dimensions of these instances were probed, e.g. source of instigation, recalled balance of positive and negative feedback, degree of surprise, desire to change and the extent to which change materialised as a result. The survey also explored relative memorability of different feedback types as well as those not perceived as applicable. Respondents were also asked to comment free form on the role of feedback in their development as a leader.

Initial versions of the survey were tested on selected members of the organisation and amended according to their feedback. It was then emailed out globally by the organisation's Group Talent and Development Director to 312 past attendees of the flagship leadership programme, with a request to participate. Only an English version was offered to potential respondents; no incentive was offered for completion of the questionnaire or participation in the interviews. Participation was anonymous unless an individual expressed an interest in a follow-up interview, in which case they were asked to identify themselves via their email address.

Some 91 responses to this initial questionnaire were received, of which 87 were deemed useable. An analysis of the results (section 4.1) highlighted potential areas for further exploration during the interview phase. On completion of the interview phase, the survey results were revisited and compared with the findings from leader interviews. Section 4.3 below reports this analysis.

3.2.2 Phase 2 – interviews

Participant identification and sampling

From the pool of 87 survey respondents, 12 leaders indicated an interest in being interviewed. Each was sent a description of the research study (Appendix 2) in order that they could make an informed decision to participate and have an opportunity to raise questions. As none deselected themselves after this stage, all 12 were contacted to arrange a suitable time and date for the interviews. Follow-up with this group, as originally planned, proved impractical and it proved impossible to source additional participants in this group due to a significant organisational restructure and subsequent changes in personnel. Sampling techniques were, therefore, part purposive and part convenience-driven, dictated by the availability of participants within an identified target group. It was therefore problematic to move from purposive/ convenience sampling to full theoretical sampling as suggested by GTM. (See section 3.2.3 below for my rationale and counteracting strategy to compensate for this potential issue for data saturation).

Access to feedback providers also proved problematic, compounded by the relatively few numbers of these individuals working in or for the organisation. Convenience sampling was, therefore, necessary and 'snowballing' techniques were required to identify these participants, and it took many months to identify and enrol them. To source internal coach participants, personal contacts in the study organisation were approached and asked to identify any (senior) HR professionals or learning and development professionals with experience of giving feedback to its senior leadership cadre. This process eventually identified six individuals who worked either in the line as senior operational HR professionals, or 'out of line' as training and development specialists. Ideally, these individuals would have been paired with members of the leader interview group, but this proved impossible to orchestrate.

Similar 'snow-balling' techniques were used to identify the external coach group, using a combination of personal contacts and help from the HR participants. Suitable individuals were deemed to be those individuals who were working with the organisation's leadership in a coaching capacity, or who had recently completed a coaching engagement with them. This search eventually yielded two coaches who worked for the organisation's preferred coach supplier and four coaches who offered coaching services alongside leadership development training or team development events for different parts of the organisation.

Participant interviews

Participants were interviewed in three groups: a leader recipient group, an HR professionals/ internal coach provider group and an external coach provider group. Individuals within these groups were designated as L1-L12, H1-HR6 and C1-C6, respectively, to preserve and protect their anonymity. In advance of each interview, participants completed and returned a consent form (see Appendix 3), which explained how their confidentiality would be maintained and asked participants to give explicit permission for the interview recording. An expectation was set that interviews would last approximately one hour, however, in practice, this varied considerably. Given the international nature of the group, all the interviews, bar one, were conducted virtually using technology such as Skype, Facetime or Zoom. All interviews were conducted in English, which was the common business language across participants, but not necessarily the first language of some participants.

Design of the initial interview protocol (see Appendix 4: Initial design of interview protocol for leader recipients) was informed by the research questions, insights gleaned from the initial leader survey and immersion in the literature. Necessarily this initial protocol evolved as the interviews progressed with questions refined, added and subtracted. In particular, substantial revisions were made between participant groups to ensure relevance and to explore themes arising from earlier participants (See Appendix 5: Initial design of interview protocol for provider interviews).

The interview protocol contained the following core elements across all participants:

- Feedback experiences: Participant experiences of developmental feedback that i) had led, and ii) had not led to some form of change in the recipient leader. A minimum of one story of each type was requested. In this section, the participants were asked to describe their lived experience of feedback exchange in as much detail as they were able to recall, including the contexts and conditions in which they occurred.
- Participant sense-making of feedback experiences: Participants were asked to analyse and interpret their feedback experiences, providing explanations of why they thought a particular feedback exchange led to a particular outcome. This conversation inevitably led them to talk more generally about their beliefs regarding feedback, explicit or implicit theories in use and the conditions they believed lead to acceptance or rejection.

- Feedback context: Participant perspectives on developmental feedback in the study organisation. Participants were asked to describe the ‘feedback culture’ of the study organisation, as well give their general opinions on the calibre of feedback provision in the organisation.
- Participant demographics: Participant role, gender, age and location

A non-directive and non-judgmental stance was taken in questioning style, attempting to avoid leading or closed questions, encouraging the participants to talk freely and at length. Necessarily each interview had a semi-structured format, diverging as individual responses to questions were explored and probed. This process inevitably uncovered new lines of enquiry as well as many ‘dead’ ends. No two interviews were, therefore, identical even if common themes rapidly emerged.

3.2.3 Phase Three: Data analysis and interpretation of interviews

A consistent method was evolved to code individual transcripts to ensure a rigorous and systematic approach to interview analysis and comparisons between individual participants and across interview groups. This section details the methods employed to code data and the approach taken to facilitate comparisons.

Coding of individual interviews

Individual interviews recordings were initially transcribed verbatim into MS Word. Any potential identifiers (e.g. names, job titles, organisation name) were removed to maintain anonymity and preserve confidentiality before loading the text into NVIVO software. Individuals were then labelled (e.g. L1) within the software rather than referring to them by name. All data was held on a password-protected computer.

Analysis of each interview followed the same process as summarised below in Figure 3-3, and detailed below:

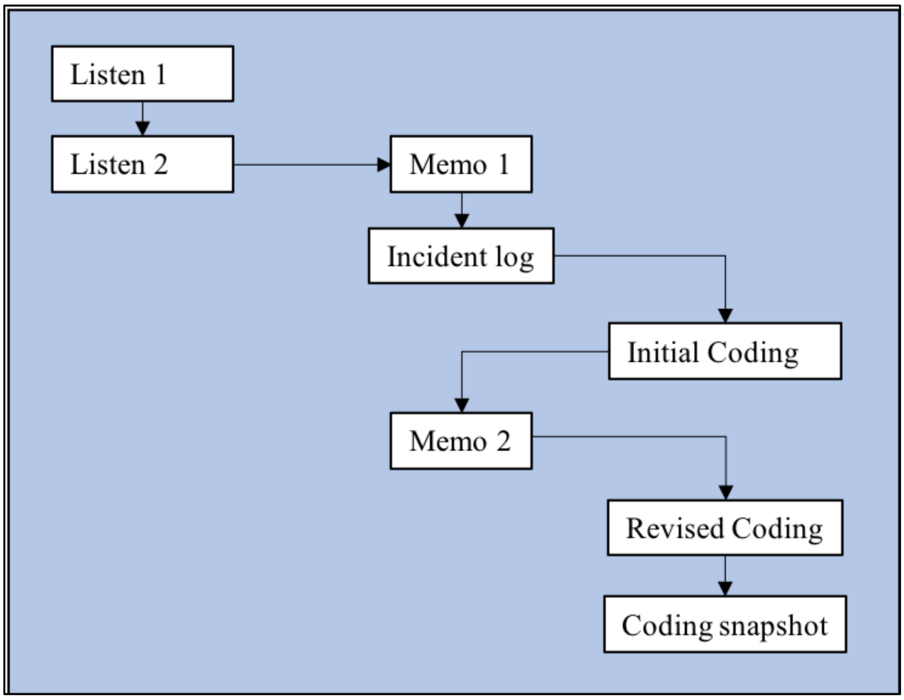

Figure 3-3: Summary of individual interview analysis process

- Listen 1 and Listen 2 – each interview recording was listened to twice (minimum) to gain an overall sense of the content of the interview.
- Memo 1 – a summary was made of the feedback incidents recounted in each interview and the main features of the interview. This memo stage was mainly focused on the content of the interview and descriptive in format, noting features of interest.
- Incident Log 1 – each feedback incident was coded with a unique identifier (e.g. L1-1). Each incident was then summarised in a log, capturing general features such as the relationship between provider and recipient, the specific type of feedback involved and the eventual outcome. This log formed the basis of the tables presented in Appendices 6-8.

- Initial coding – line by line coding was completed of each interview in NVIVO, with sections of text assigned to one or more specific 'nodes'. Each 'node' was given a meaningful name summarising the content, using a gerund format. (Bryant, 2017: 114) as far as possible. Definitions of code names were compiled using NVIVO tools. Appendix 9 gives an example of the initial coding of text fragments.
- Memo 2 – a second memo was completed for each interview based on deeper immersion and engagement with the text. Rather than descriptive, these memos tended to be more analytical and questioning in style, raising possible themes and lines of investigation for later consideration.
- Revised coding – the node names were compared and deduplicated as necessary. Unclear node titles or definitions were eliminated at this point. Nodes were then clustered into larger categories which were then appropriately titled and defined. These categories were then further clustered into broader themes. Appendix 9 shows an example of the coding hierarchy as applied to text from incident L1-1.
- Coding snapshot – At the end of each interview analysis, a snapshot of the coding structure was captured and preserved. This snapshot showed the number of text fragments in each node at that point. It was, therefore, possible to trace the evolution of coding between interviews, and the evolution of individual nodes, categories and themes.

It worth noting that while NVIVO made possible the efficient handling of the large volume of transcript data, the tool encouraged coding of small fragments of text, resulting in a code mountain which had to be deduplicated, distilled and structured. This tended to make the analysis an overly reductive and time-consuming process, and it was easy to lose sight of the 'gestalt' of any given interview and the sense of overall meanings conveyed. The additional process of memo writing was, therefore, essential to enable shuttling between decontextualized elements of the data and overall contextualised sense-making. Memo generation was, therefore, a critical element of the process, alongside the coding of nodes and generation of themes and categories.

Coding across interviews, within-participant groups

In addition to the above process for individual interview analysis, comparisons were made across interviews, within participant groups. This process is summarised in Figure 3-4 and detailed below:

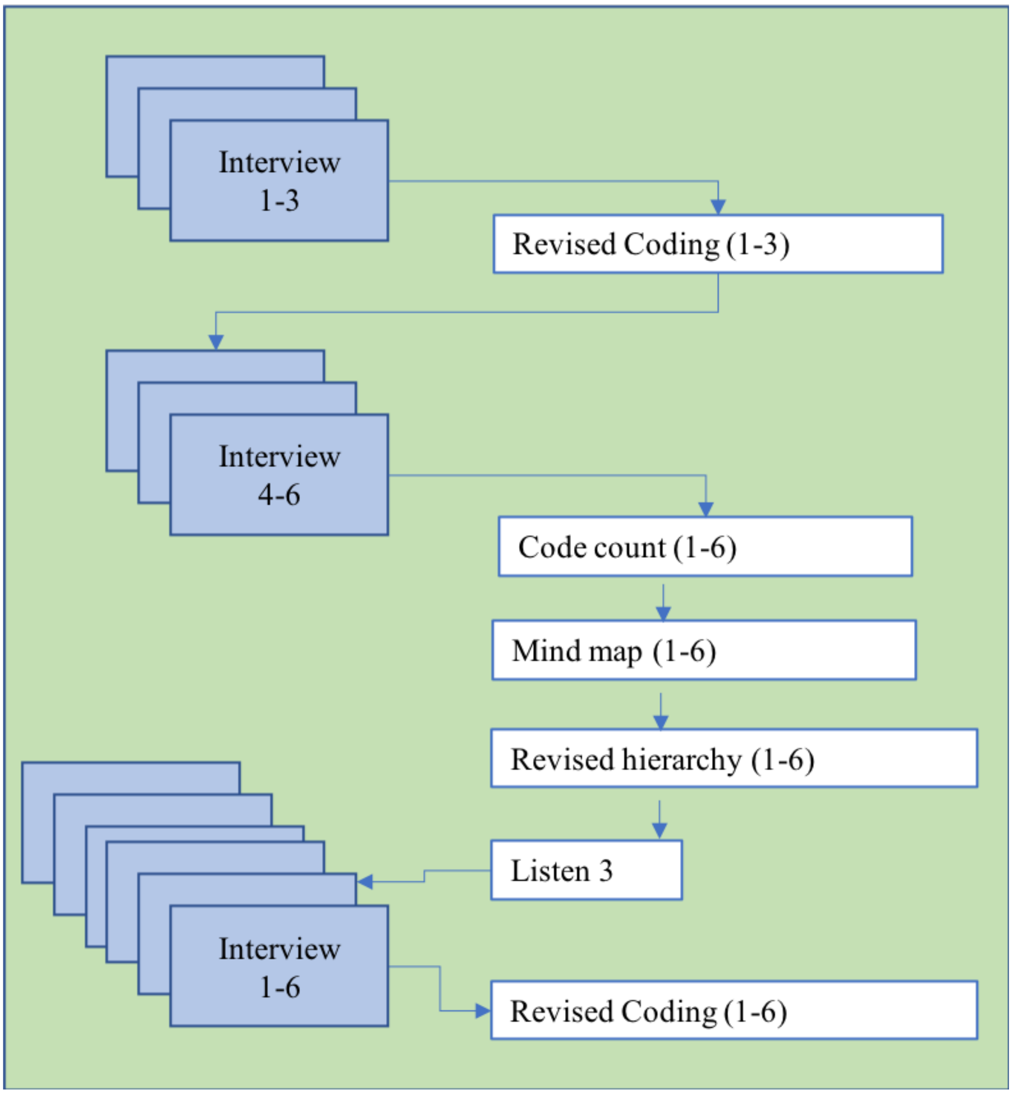

Figure 3-4: Summary of the interview analysis process (within participant groups).

- Revised coding (Interviews 1-3) – after coding every three interviews (using the process described above) a more radical revision of node coding was conducted. This process again resulted in deduplication of codes, retitling and refinement of definitions as well as alterations to the emerging category and themes structures. An additional memo was made at this stage if warranted, noting points of comparison.
- Code count 1- after every six interviews had completed revised coding, a code count was made using the NVIVO software. This step was used to check coding frequencies and the relative sizes of categories. Overlarge and over general categories were split into smaller categories or aggregated in other cases into larger ones. Theme titles were revised as required at this stage.
- Mind map (Interviews 1-6). Again, using the NVIVO software, a visual representation of the categories and themes was made in the form of a mind map. For example, see Appendix 10 for a mind map representation of the Leader interviews.
- Revision of coding hierarchy (Interviews 1-6). Further revisions to the coding structure were made at this stage as required, with an attached memo to capture thoughts and observations made at this stage.
- Listen 3 (Interviews 1-6). Each interview was listened to again as a final check on coding consistency and completeness. Additionally, initial notes and memos were revisited (particularly Memo 2), to ensure no significant material had been lost or misplaced. Quotations that were illustrative of the themes and clusters were annotated within the text for later reference.
- Revision of coding (Interviews 1-6). The final coding of nodes and coding structure was then captured using the NVIVO 'snapshot' facility and the mind map of the

interviews amended as needed. Additional memos were drafted at this stage as required.

The above process was repeated twice to complete coding of the 12 leader interviews.

Achieving data saturation

According to Charmaz (2014), data saturation is achieved through an iterative process of data collection and analysis until the point where '*gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories*. (Charmaz, 2014:213). As mentioned above, due to participant access restrictions, transitioning from purpose sampling to full theoretical sampling by adding extra participants proved impossible. Instead, achieving saturation was monitored through the coding snapshots, the evolution of coding structures and memos, and constant comparisons of insights emerging between participants and across participant groups. Appendix 11: Coding count, shows the relative contribution of new nodes from each interview and demonstrates how the emergence of new unique nodes diminished as the interviews progressed, to the point where minimal additional material appeared, and themes became repetitive.

Analysis and interpretation of coding results

After completing the coding of each participant group, analysis and interpretation of results was conducted, including consideration of memos written at different stages of the analysis. This analysis necessarily moved away from the minutiae of the data and detailed coding, to a broader sense-making and interpretation of the over-arching themes and patterns of similarity or difference within participant groups. Data comparisons were, therefore, 'bottom-up', starting with a comparison of individual feedback incidents within interviews, moving to comparisons between participants accounts, before looking across participant groups. Figure 3-5 summarises this data comparison strategy.

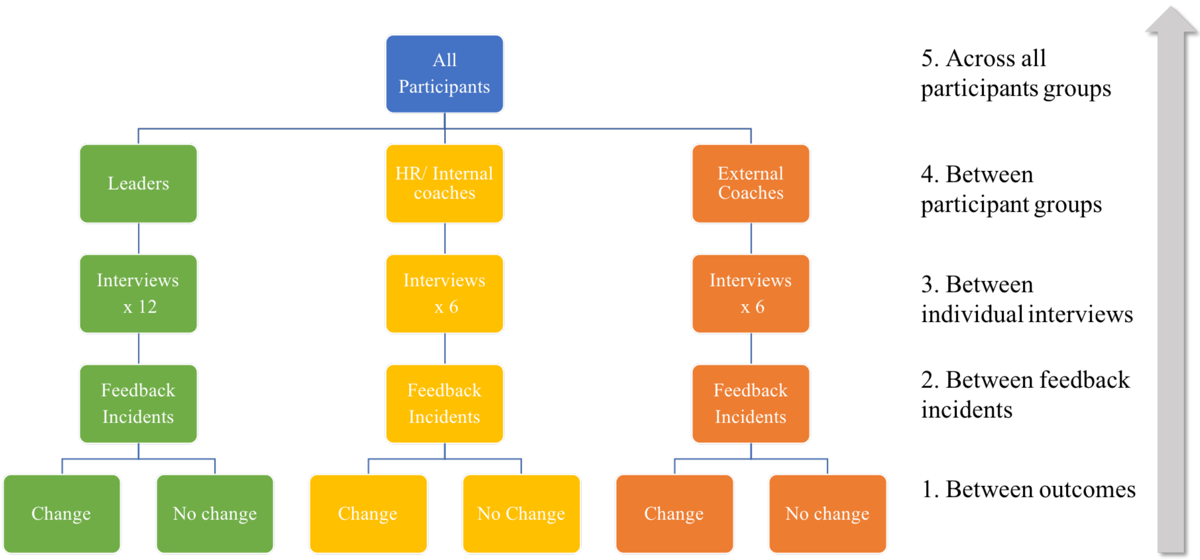

Figure 3-5: Data comparison strategy

Figure 3-6 below summarises the sequence of data analysis and write up. Findings are presented in the respective results chapters (Chapters 4-6). A comparison of findings across recipient and provider groups is detailed in Chapter 7.

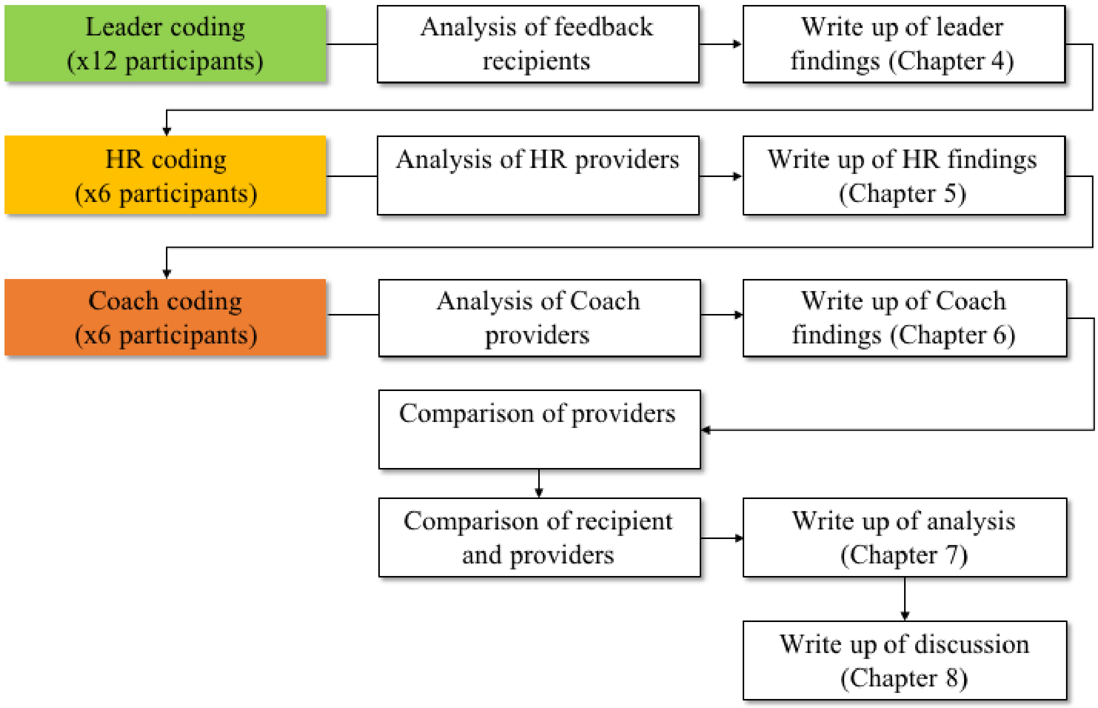

Figure 3-6: Sequence of analysis and write up

Finally, overarching themes emerging from the study, including tentative theorising and model building, are present in Chapter 8: Discussion.

3.3 Ethical considerations

This section summarises the ethical considerations associated with the study. Ethical approval was gained from the Oxford Brookes University Ethics Committee. As part of the preparation for the application, several potential ethical risks were identified, and strategies incorporated into the study design to manage and mitigate these.

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, I had a prior relationship with the study organisation as a trainer and coach. It was, therefore, possible that dependent or blurred relationship might exist with participants. This risk was mitigated by the automatic deselection of individuals whom I had worked in the capacity of coach or feedback provider.

Clear separation of roles was also maintained with participants throughout the study, e.g. the use of University logo and personal contact details on all correspondence. Participation was positioned as entirely voluntary and as having no adverse consequences (from the organisation or otherwise) if a participant chose not to take part or withdraw their consent at a later point. No offers or inducements were made to participants to take part.

Interview participants selected themselves through an opt-in process, and explicit written consent (see Appendix 3) was required from participants before an interview took place. To ensure participants gave their informed consent a full description of the research study was provided in the form of an information sheet (Appendix 2), detailing potential risks and benefits. Participants were given an opportunity to clarify their understanding of the research aims and process. In addition, the study organisation also received a written description of the study and written approval to proceed was received before participants were contacted.

Given the possibility that research participants could be identified due to small sample sizes, several steps were taken to assure their anonymity and confidentiality. All potential identifiers (e.g. name, role or title, location) were removed from the transcripts and replaced with codes. These codes were used throughout the analysis and reporting of findings. Also, the study organisation's name was replaced with XYZ plc, so it would be difficult to identify the study context. These measures were described fully in the participant information sheet and consent form, along with legal and practical limitations on full confidentiality/ anonymity. Individual participants were also asked at the start of interviews if these measures were satisfactory and asked to add any other steps they required; however, none took this opportunity.

Given the sensitive nature of the discussion topic, a potential risk was creating distress or other adverse reaction. To mitigate this possibility an offer was made of a follow-up conversation in which participants could debrief their reactions. No other adverse to myself or the participants, beyond those reasonably expected in daily life, were foreseen.

Finally, all data was held in line with current GDPR data management practices (Information Commissioner's Office, 2020) and the University's policy on data integrity. For example, all data was stored on a password-protected computer and files further protected with additional security. Paper copies of materials were stored in a separate locked filing cabinet. Data management practices were described to participants and formed an explicit part of the consent process. All data relating to the study will be destroyed in line with GDPR guidance.

3.4 Quality criteria

As well as conducting the research, researchers need to critically evaluate the processes and methods employed and take active measures to ensure the quality of end products. Willig (2001: 148), argues that '*evaluation criteria need to be compatible with the epistemological framework of the research being evaluated'*. While positivist and post-positivist research traditions have developed evaluation criteria (albeit contended and of varying maturity and acceptance), Jayanti (2011) argues that few equivalent criteria exist for judging research conducted informed by a pragmatic lens. This section therefore both proposes suitable criteria and lists the action taken to ensure quality outcomes.

Martela (2015: 540) suggests the primary goal of any pragmatically informed research is to produce warranted assertions, i.e. '*outcomes of inquiry that are so settled that we are ready* *to act upon them yet remain always open to be changed in the future'*. Research should, therefore, be primarily evaluated on the usefulness of its products to the relevant parties. However, Martela also argues that research products must derive from a credible process of inquiry:

> *"We come to 'believe' certain assertions through the process of inquiry, and in this process of inquiry we rely on certain ways of arriving at conclusions that have in the past proven to be more reliable than others" (Martela, 2015: 540)*

Bryant (2017: 361) suggests that criteria evolved by both Glaser (1992) and Charmaz (2014) are relevant to evaluating pragmatically informed GT research, given a shared emphasis on the 'immediacy of usefulness' of outputs, as well as providing a framework for guiding methodological rigour. Given the constructivist nature of this study, Charmaz's (2014: 337-338) criteria of 'credibility', 'originality', 'resonance' and 'usefulness' were therefore adopted as relevant and comprehensive evaluation criteria, consistent with the philosophy of pragmatism.

Table 3-3 below articulates the measures taken in the study design to address these quality criteria:

Table 3-3: Measures taken to address quality criteria (Charmaz, 2014:337-338)

Quality Criteria	Sub-criteria: Does the study…	Measures undertaken in the study
Credibility	Demonstrate familiarity with the setting/ topic?	Chapter 1 gives an overview of the researcher's experience of using developmental feedback in organisational contexts and the relationship with the study organisation. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the empirical, practitioner and theoretical debate.
	Show sufficient data to warrant claims?	The study collected questionnaire responses from 87 respondents. Transcripts from 24 interviews (1266 minutes of recording) were collected and coded line by line. Coding saturation was demonstrated by monitoring the evolution of coding across and within participant groups
	Show a systematic comparison between observations & between categories?	Chapter 3 outlines the methods used to compare data systematically within interviews, within and across participant groups. Chapter 4 presents comparisons between leader survey and interview findings. Chapters 4-6 present findings within participant groups. Chapter 7 presents findings across participants groups.
	Show categories which cover a wide range of empirical observations?	Categories covered the content and process of feedback exchange, forms of feedback, types of responses and outcomes, lived and construed experiences. Perspectives from both feedback providers and feedback recipients were included.
	Show strong logical links between data, argument and analysis?	Chapter 3 articulate the links between data coding, method of analysis and subsequent theorising is given, and demonstrated with examples (See Appendices 9 and 10). A consistent format was used to report findings and enable cross-comparisons between data sets (See Section 3.5)

Quality Criteria	Sub-criteria: Does the study…	Measures undertaken in the study
Credibility (continued)	Provide enough evidence to enable the reader to form an independent assessment?	The survey analysis was illustrated with summative tables and graphs of source data (See Section 4.1). The interview analysis was illustrated with summative tables and extensive verbatim quotes from a range of participants (Chapters 4-6). Contextual data was provided to situate findings. Appendices 6-8 provide additional supporting evidence in the form of an incident log.
Originality	Include fresh categories, which offers new insights?	The data was analysed 'bottom-up' allowing unexpected and novel categories to emerge (See Section 3.2). The supervisory team scrutinised the categorisation of data. Findings chapters were structured to ensure a clear separation between the reporting of results and interpretation by the researcher (Section 3.5).
	Provide a conceptual rendering of the data?	Synthesis of analysis and interpretation of data is given in each of the finding's chapters (Chapters 4-6). Conceptual comparisons made across groups as well as within groups (Chapter 7). Conceptual rendering of findings from an alternate theoretical perspective presented in Chapter 8.
	Have social and theoretical significance?	Relevance to current theoretical debate and communities of practice was demonstrated as part of the literature review (Chapter 2). The implications for stakeholders were detailed as part of the conclusions (Chapter 9).
	Challenge, extend or refine current ideas, concepts and practice?	The study offers new perspectives on a 'taken for granted' topic (Chapter 8). Comparisons are made throughout with current literature and key concepts in the field. The discussion challenges the dominant paradigm regarding feedback amongst practitioners and offers new models for improved understanding and practice.

Quality Criteria	**Sub-criteria: Does the study…**	**Measures undertaken in the study**
Resonance	Portray the fullness of the studied experience?	The study considers the perspectives of internal and providers as well as recipients. It considered dimensions of emotive, cognitive and somatic experiencing. Extensive illustrative quotes are used throughout the findings chapters to convey the fullness of individual experiences. Both consensus and non-consensus views were included in descriptions of accounts.
	Reveal both liminal and unstable taken-for-granted meanings?	The analysis of texts included the examination of taken for granted assumptions and liminal meanings. The study revealed unspoken assumptions and power dynamics at play in feedback conversations.
	Draw links between larger collectivities/ institutions and individual lives?	The study was situated within the context of a large multi-national organisation, exploring individual perceptions of organisational practice as well as individual experiences. The conclusion chapter articulates implications for feedback participants and for those tasked with developing leaders in organisations.
	Make sense to your participants or people who share their circumstance?	Categories and themes arising from interview analysis are consistent with those arising from questionnaire respondents and themes present in the extant literature.

Quality Criteria	**Sub-criteria: Does the study…**	**Measures undertaken in the study**
Usefulness	Offer interpretations that people can use in their everyday life?	The study provides warranted assertions that may be extensible to other contexts. The study provides a range of new models and perspectives to inform the practice of coaches/ HR professionals in giving feedback. Chapter 9 makes suggestions for improved individual and organisational practice.
	Analysis suggests generic processes?	The study offers a model of generic conditions impacting feedback acceptance/ rejection. It also offers a generic model of feedback provision, from the perspective of participants which elaborates on existing formulation. A conceptualisation of individual interpretation and responses to feedback is also suggested.
	Explore tacit implications?	The implications for feedback providers/ recipients are explored and debated as part of the discussion and conclusion.
	Spark further research in other substantive areas?	The study suggests areas for further research throughout and makes specific suggests as part of the conclusion (Chapter 9)
	Contribute to knowledge/ making a better world?	The study gives further insight into a fundamental process of learning. Ideas for improved practice are offered in Chapter 9.

3.5 Structure and Presentation of findings

The following chapters present the findings relating to the Leader participants (Chapter 4), HR professionals (Chapter 5) and external coach participants (Chapter 6). Within Chapter 4, the information is structured into findings arising from the leader survey (Section 4.1) and those emerging from the interview process (Section 4.2). Reporting of findings from the leader survey follows the structure of the questionnaire and shows graphical comparisons between all respondents and the interview group for each (numerical) question. Illustrative quotes are used to evidence the responses to open-ended questions.

For the interview findings, contextual data is provided at the beginning of each chapter, giving an overview of the participant group (e.g. role, gender, location, notable sub-groups), and the reported feedback incidents, including types and valence of feedback involved and relationship to the provider. This contextual data derived from the incident log data is presented in Appendices 6-8.

In order to facilitate comparisons across participant groups, findings from the interviews were structured consistently, paralleling the areas of research interest described in section 3.1.2. Themes arising from the analysis were therefore categorised (see Appendix 9: Coding sample) under the following headings, and illustrated with relevant quotes from the transcripts:

- Phenomenological experience: Descriptions of the lived experience of participants involved in feedback conversations, either as a recipient or provider of feedback, including affective and cognitive reactions.
- Actions and outcomes:

- Recipient Leaders – actions taken, and changes made by recipients as a result of receiving feedback
- Providers – methods of feedback delivery and ways of working used to deliver feedback

- Participant sense-making: Explanations provided by participants for their responses to feedback and the conditions they believed led to feedback acceptance or rejection

To complete each findings chapter, I present my analysis and interpretation of findings (researcher sense-making), making comparisons with the extant literature, where relevant. The complete structure of Chapters 4-6 is as summarised in Figure 3-7 below:

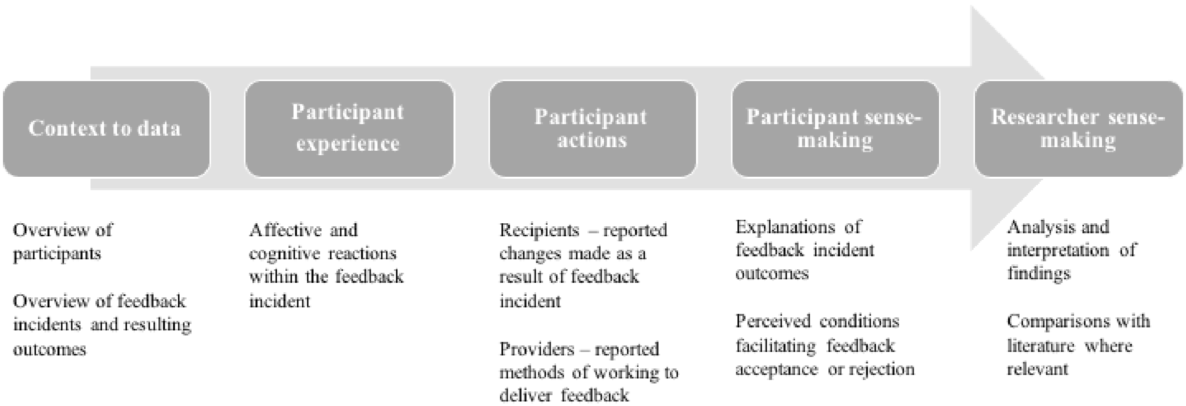

Figure 3-7: Generic structure of Chapters 4-6: participant findings

In addition to the findings' chapters for each participant group, Chapter 7 presents cross-comparisons of research findings, firstly, between provider groups, and secondly across all participant groups. This chapter concludes with an interpretation and makes comparisons with the relevant literature. In the main discussion (Chapter 8) overarching themes of the study will be considered in the light of the major contributions to theory and practice.

Chapter 4: Findings – Leader participants

This chapter contains a summary of findings from two sources: firstly, the survey of leaders working in the study organisation (section 4.1), and secondly, in-depth qualitative interviews with a sub-group of 12 leaders (section 4.2). Section 4.3 presents an analysis of these findings, drawing out points of comparison between the data sets. This section also presents initial conceptualisations of aspects of the data. Points of similarity and difference with the extant literature are noted.

4.1 Summary of survey results

4.1.1 Context to data

As outlined in section 3.2.1 above, the research process began with the creation of a short survey (Appendix 1) which was sent out worldwide to some 312 senior leaders within the study organisation. This request yielded some 91 respondents of which 87 were deemed useable (28% response rate). Specifically, the survey targeted recent past attendees of the organisation's flagship leadership development programme. It was therefore known that this group had experience of receiving developmental feedback of varying types and from a variety of internal and external providers. For example, many had been through a development centre before attending the leadership programme, and all had received 360º/ multi-rater feedback and psychometric feedback as a precursor. The programme also encouraged the exchange of peer feedback during and after the programme. Outside of the programme, all respondents also took part in the annual appraisal process and should have received feedback on their performance and development from their line manager on a half-yearly basis.

The balance of this section reports responses to questions in graphical and tabular format, comparing responses from all respondents with those of the interview participants. After rating memorability and applicability of different feedback sources (Q1), questionnaire respondents were asked to recall 1-3 specific instances of feedback and assess each one against a range of factors (see below Q2-Q7). This process yielded some 144 instances of memorable feedback across all 87 questionnaire respondents, and 22 instances from the twelve interview participants- i.e. a roughly equivalent rate of recall. Finally, respondents were asked to describe the role of feedback in leader development. Resulting open-ended text responses were coded using NVIVO software, and resulting themes are evidenced throughout the text using a selection of illustrative quotes.

Initial commentary is made both on the overall results whilst noting any particular similarities and differences with the interviewee group. In broad terms, the interview participants appear broadly similar in their responses to the wider group, sharing similar experiences of receiving feedback from a similar range of sources, and with similar consequent changes. Section 4.3.1 below further analyses this data, looking more specifically at the potential relationship between influencing factors and final outcome. Comparison is made with the qualitative interview data and areas of corroboration and disagreement noted.

4.1.2 Analysis of survey responses

Q1a: Feedback Memorability

Rank the sources of feedback you have received in terms of memorability (10= Most memorable, 1 = least memorable). Please use N/A to deselect sources that are not applicable to you.

Across all questionnaire respondents, 360º/ multi-rater feedback was perceived as the most memorable form of feedback, followed closely by feedback from a line manager. Notably, peer feedback was also seen as memorable, ranking ahead of other facilitated sources (development centres, psychometrics), feedback received on training events of different types, and even from family or friends. While the interview participants also saw 360º/ multi-rater feedback as the most memorable form of data, this was followed by Development Centre feedback. Line manager and peer feedback were reported as similarly memorable.

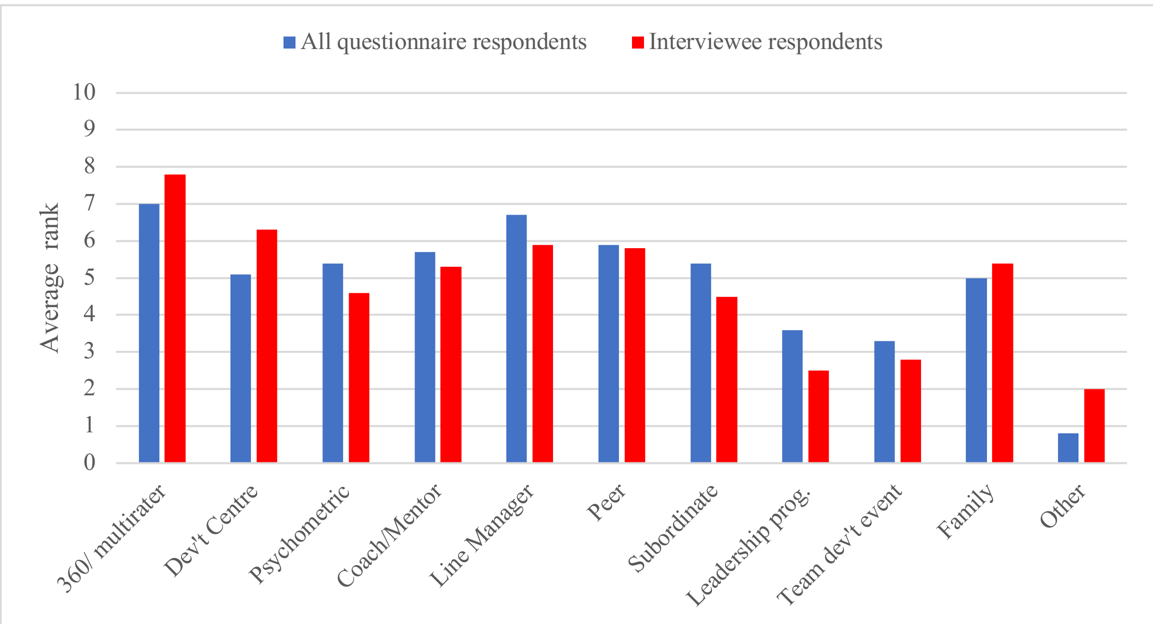

Figure 4-1: Feedback memorability by source: comparison of questionnaire respondents and interview participant responses.

Table 4-1: Feedback memorability by source: comparison of questionnaire respondents and interview participant responses

		All questionnaire respondents -	*All interview participants -*
Feedback source	Feedback type:	Average rank/10	*Average rank/10*
Facilitated sources	360º/ multi-rater	**7.0**	***7.8***
	Development Centre	5.1	***6.3***
	Psychometric	5.4	*4.6*
Coach/ Mentor		5.7	*5.3*
Line relationships	Line Manager	**6.7**	***5.9***
	Peer	5.9	*5.8*
	Team member or subordinate	5.4	*4.5*
Training events	Leadership programme	3.6	*2.5*
	Team development event	3.3	*2.8*
Family of Friends		5.0	*5.4*
Other	HR, Customer	0.8	*2.0*

Q1b: Feedback Applicability

In addition to ranking different types of feedback regarding their relative memorability participants were also able to indicate which types of feedback applied to them. This data clearly showed in both the groups the relative importance of feedback from line relationships. Surprisingly, the results also suggested that some participants did not see 360º/ multi-rater feedback and psychometric feedback as applicable to them, despite all having been recipients of such feedback. Less surprising was the low applicability of 'coach/mentor' as access to such resources may have been constrained by cost considerations.

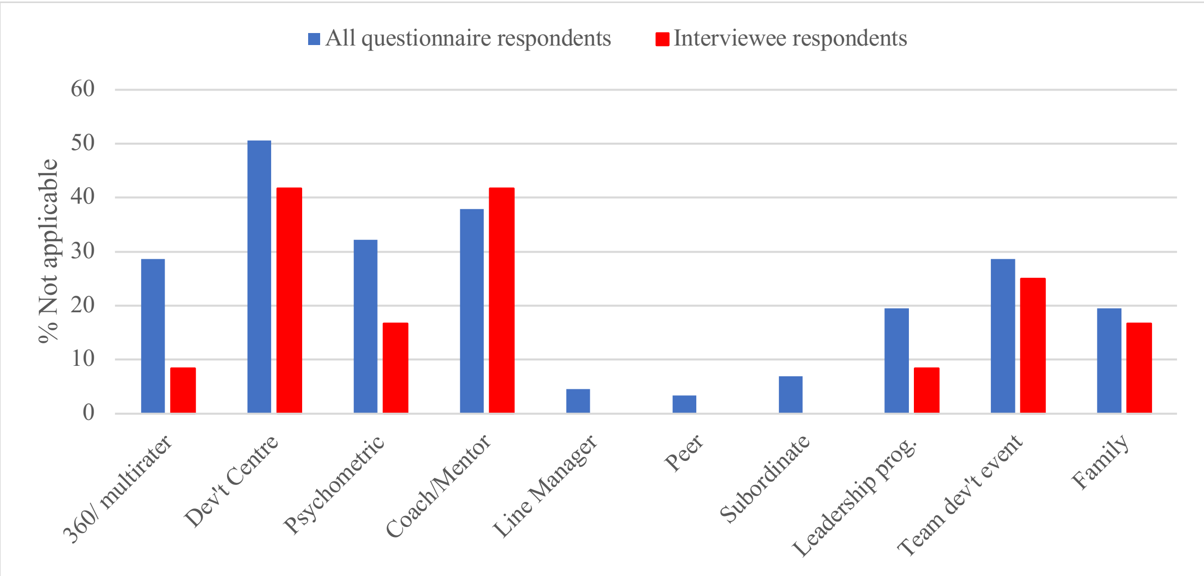

Figure 4-2: Feedback source by applicability: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses - % not-applicable

Table 4-2: Feedback source by applicability: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

		All questionnaire respondents -	*All interview participants -*
Feedback source	Feedback type:	% N/A	*%N/A*
Facilitated sources	360º/ multi-rater	28.7	*8.3*
	Development Centre	50.6	*41.7*
	Psychometric	32.2	*16.7*
Coach/ Mentor		37.9	*41.7*
Line relationships	Line Manager	4.6	*0.0*
	Peer	3.4	*0.0*
	Team member or subordinate	6.9	*0.0*
Training events	Leadership programme	19.5	*8.3*
	Team development event	28.7	*25.0*
Family or Friends		19.5	*16.7*
		100%	*100%*

Q2 Instigation

Who was this instance of feedback instigated by?

Across both the questionnaire respondents and interview participant the most popular choice was ‘Jointly instigated’, followed by ‘Instigated by others’ A minority (23.6% and 13.6%) indicated that they sought out the recalled feedback for themselves.

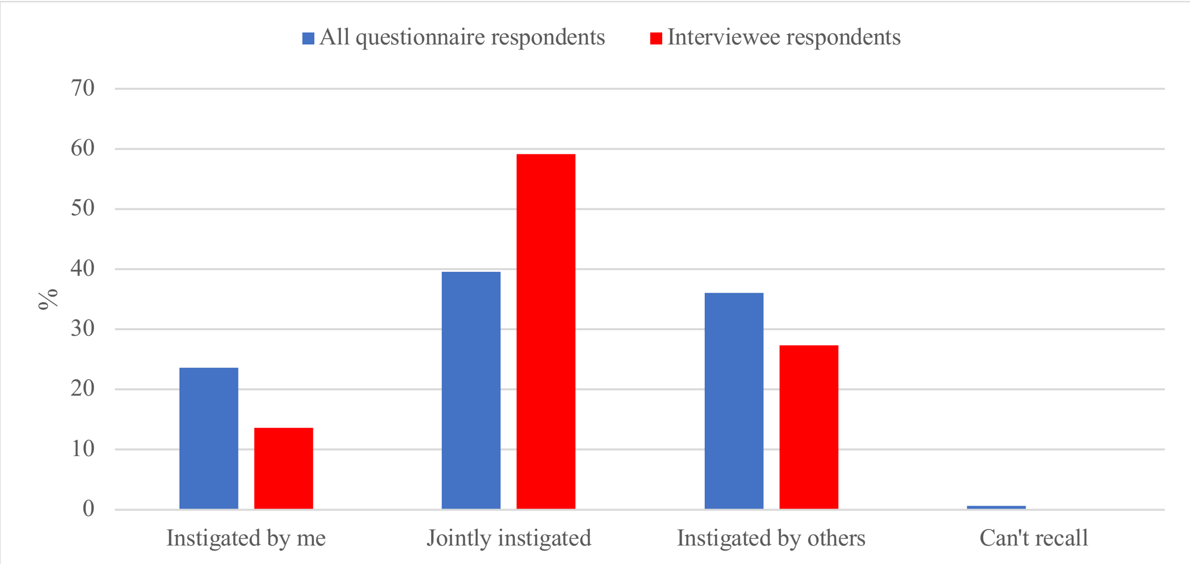

Figure 4-3: Instigation of feedback: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

Table 4-3: Instigation of feedback: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

	All questionnaire respondents -		*All interview participants -*	
Instigation choices	No responses	% responses	*No responses*	*% responses*
Instigated by me	34	23.6	*3*	*13.6*
Jointly instigated	57	39.6	*13*	*59.1*
Instigated by others	52	36.1	*6*	*27.3*
Can’t recall	1	0.7	*0*	*0*
Total incidents	144	100.0	*22*	*100.0*

Q3 Valence recall

What was the relative balance of positive/negative messages in this specific instance of feedback?

While the questionnaire respondents were most likely to recall feedback as ‘Mostly positive’, the interview group were more likely to recall feedback that was ‘All positive’. Outside of these two categories, the two groups were similar in that they recalled relatively few instances of negative feedback. This finding was a slightly surprising result, given descriptions given of the general feedback ‘culture’ but may reflect issues of social desirability influencing responses.

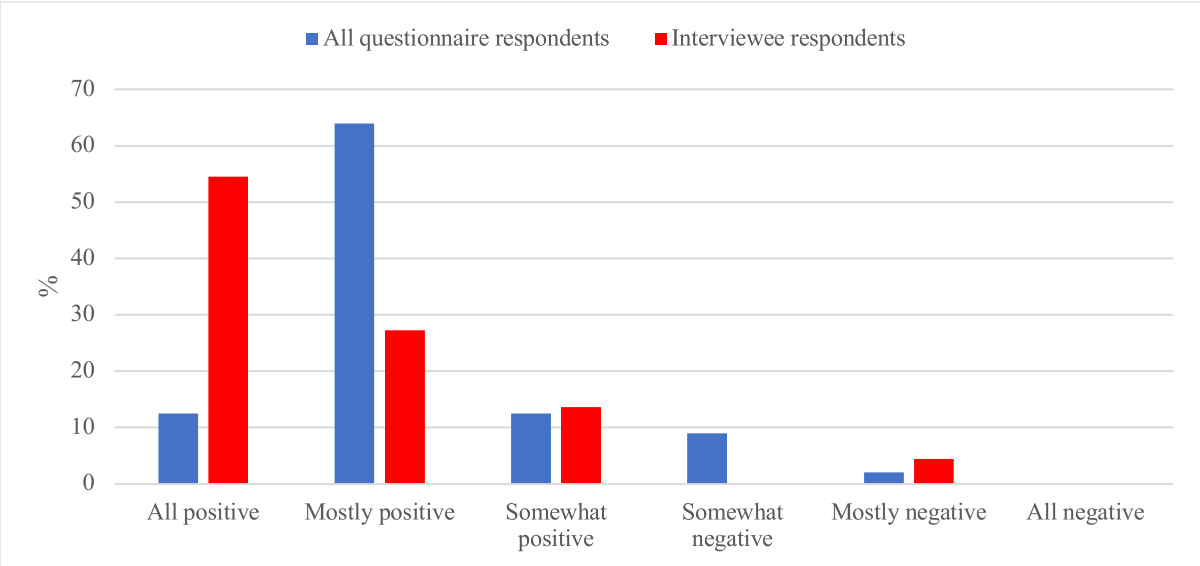

Figure 4-4: Feedback valence recall: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

Table 4-4: Feedback valence recall: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

Valence choices	All questionnaire respondents - No responses	% responses	*All interview participants -* No responses	% responses
All positive	18	12.5	*12*	*54.5*
Mostly positive	92	63.9	*6*	*27.3*
Somewhat positive	18	12.5	*3*	*13.6*
Somewhat negative	13	9.0	*0*	*0*
Mostly negative	3	2.1	*1*	*4.5*
All negative	0	0	*0*	*0*
Total incidents	144	100.0	*22*	*100.0*

Q4 Degree of agreement

To what extent did you agree with this piece of feedback?

In terms of agreement with the feedback, little difference was apparent between questionnaire respondents and interview participants in that the majority 'mostly agreed'.

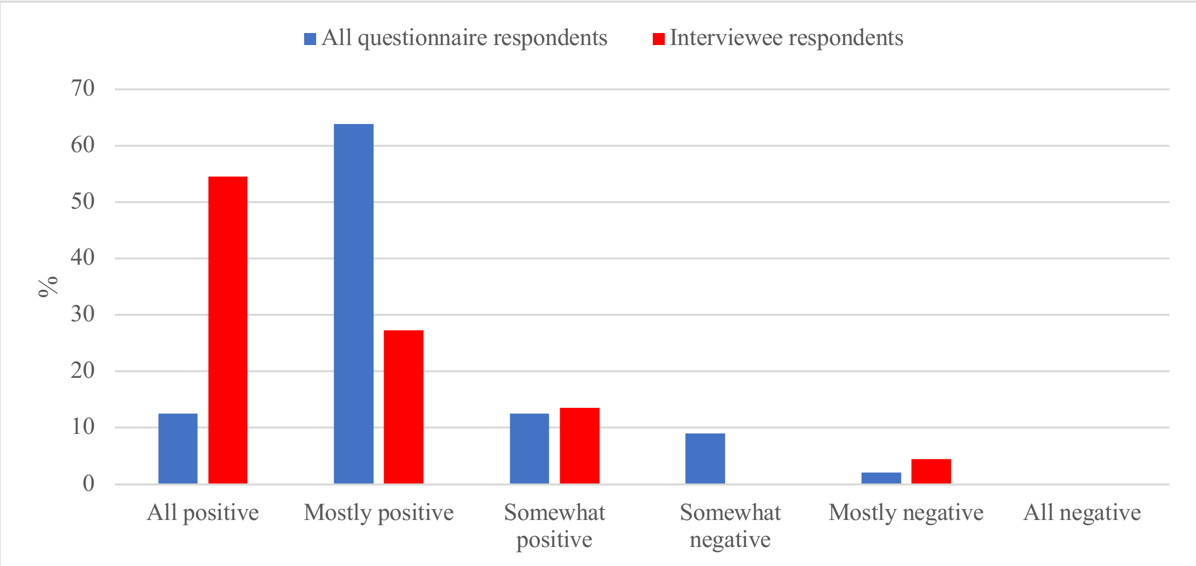

Figure 4-5: Degree of agreement: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

Table 4-5: Degree of agreement: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

Agreement choices	All questionnaire respondents - No responses	% responses	*All interview participants - No responses*	% responses
Totally agreed	17	11.8	*1*	*4.5*
Mostly agreed	96	66.7	*15*	*68.2*
Somewhat agreed	21	14.6	*4*	*18.2*
Somewhat disagreed	9	6.3	*2*	*2*
Mostly disagreed	1	0.7	*0*	*0*
Totally disagreed	0	0	*0*	*0*
Total incidents	144	100.0	*22*	*100.0*

Q5 Degree of surprise

To what extent did this piece of feedback surprise you?

For both groups, the most common answer was 'somewhat surprising'. However, roughly equal proportions in both groups were likely to be surprised versus unsurprised. This finding would suggest that in many cases of feedback, recipients perceive themselves as having some degree of awareness of the core message and that being completely taken by surprise is seen as unusual.

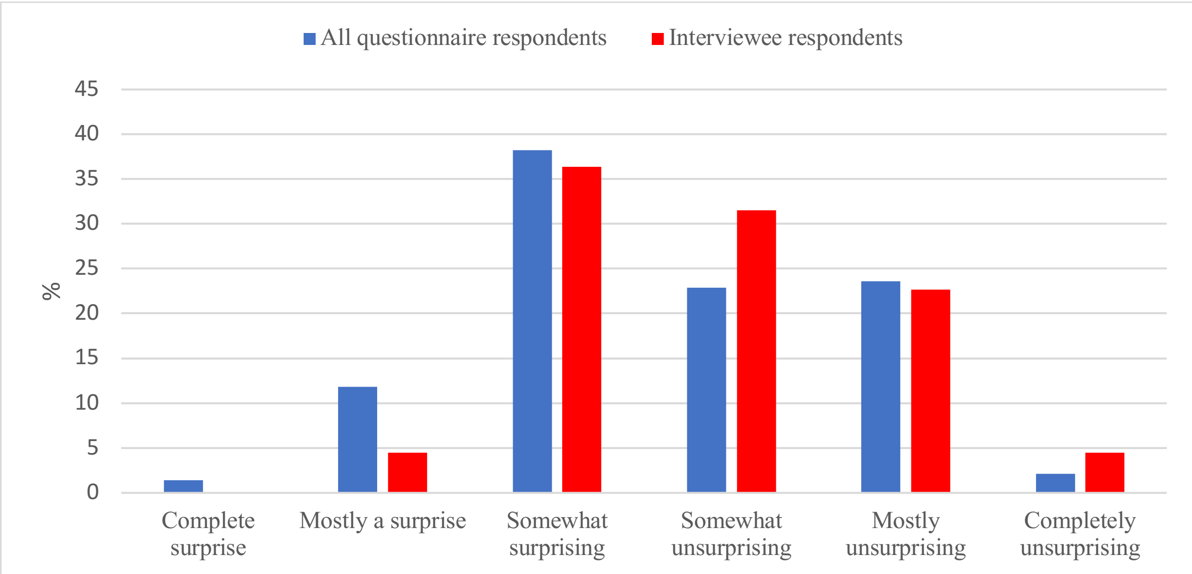

Figure 4-6: Degree of surprise: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

Table 4-6: Degree of surprise - comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses.

	All questionnaire respondents -		*All interview participants -*	
Degree of surprise	No responses	% responses	*No responses*	*% responses*
Complete surprise	2	1.4		
Mostly a surprise	17	11.8	*1*	*4.5*
Somewhat surprising	55	38.2	*8*	*36.4*
Somewhat unsurprising	33	22.9	*7*	*31.5*
Mostly unsurprising	34	23.6	*5*	*22.7*
Completely unsurprising	3	2.1	*1*	*4.5*
Total incidents	144	100.0	*22*	*100.0*

Q6 Desire to change

To what extent has this piece of feedback led to a desire to change?

Respondents and interviewees were asked to rate the desire to change that was elicited by the feedback. Both groups indicated that the feedback they had received had stimulated some degree of desire to change. Relatively few felt the feedback had provoked a strong desire to change, or indeed no desire to change.

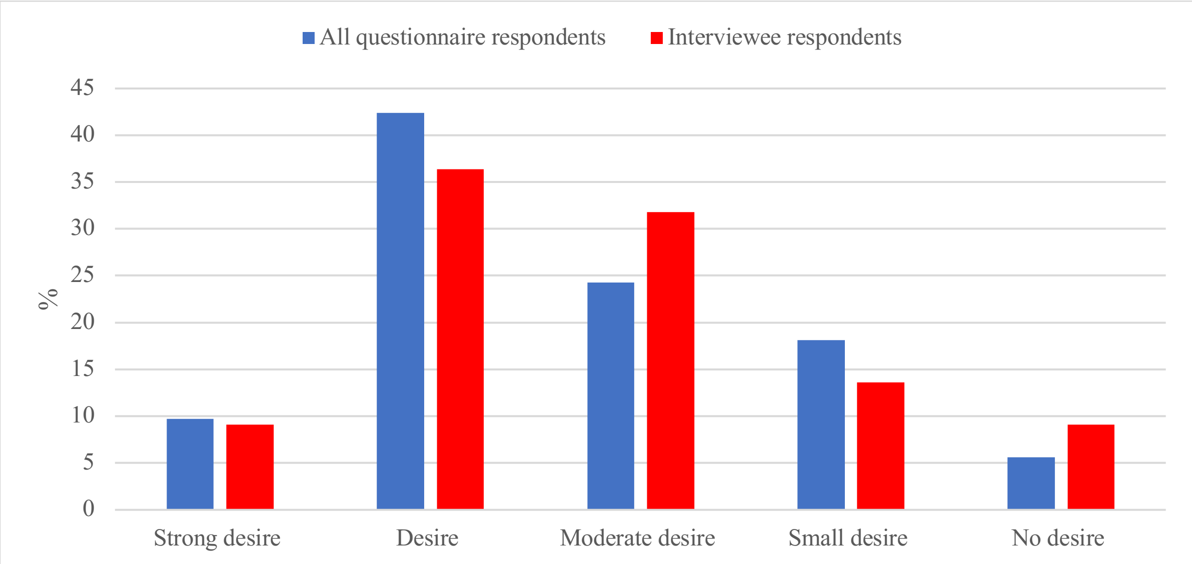

Figure 4-7: Desire to change: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

Table 4-7: Desire to change: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

	All questionnaire respondents-		*All interview participants -*	
Degree of desire to change	No responses	% responses	*No responses*	*% responses*
Strong desire to change	14	9.7	*2*	*9.1*
Desire to change	61	42.4	*8*	*36.4*
Moderate desire to change	35	24.3	*7*	*31.8*
Small desire to change	26	18.1	*3*	*13.6*
No desire to change	8	5.6	*2*	*9.1*
Total incidents	144	100.0	*22*	*100.0*

Q7 Change materialisation

To what extent has this piece of feedback materialised in a change?

All questionnaire respondents and interview participants were asked to select the degree to which a feedback instance had materialised in some form of change. Noticeably both groups reported some moderate or limited change resulting from feedback. However, the interview participants were more likely to report change ‘to a great extent’ compared to the questionnaire respondents.

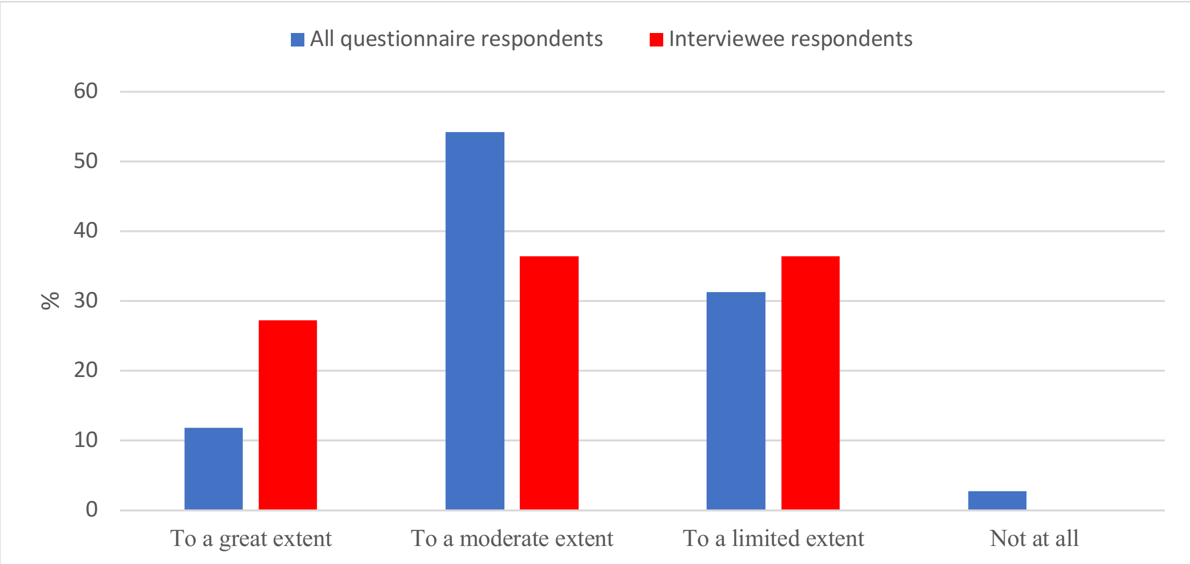

Figure 4-8: Change materialisation: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

Table 4-8: Degree of change: comparison of questionnaire respondents with interview participant responses

	All questionnaire respondents -		*All interview participants -*	
Degree of change	No responses	% responses	*No responses*	*% responses*
To a great extent	17	11.8	*6*	*27.3*
To a moderate extent	78	54.2	*8*	*36.4*
To a limited extent	45	31.3	*8*	*36.4*
Not at all	4	2.8	*0*	*0*
Total	144	100.0	*22*	*100.0*

Q8. Role of feedback in leader development

Thinking more generally now, how do you see the role of feedback in your development as a leader?

In addition to asking participants to rate individual instances of memorable feedback, respondents were asked to articulate the role of feedback in their development as a free format question. In summary, the questionnaire respondents overwhelmingly saw feedback as vitally important or essential to their development as leaders. Themes amongst the responses fell into three broad areas. Firstly, respondents described the perceived value of feedback to them as helping them to understand their impact on others (their 'leadership shadow') and heighten their awareness of the differences between self and other's perception:

> *"It's very-very important. It allows you to reflect back on how you saw it and how others perceived it. There are instances of big gaps, which are not seen by me and hence ignored. These feedback makes me think differently and helps me to work on areas, which otherwise would been ignored."* Questionnaire respondent.

Feedback was seen (by many) as motivational, building confidence and self-esteem if handled correctly. Respondents saw it as instrumental in helping them to identify areas for improvement, providing a check on their decision making, as well as helping them to think and behave differently and better:

> *"Feedback is critical to my development as a leader. Feedback is one of the primary ways I measure my effectiveness as a leader. It highlights both strengths and weaknesses."* Questionnaire respondent.

A second theme in the responses concerned the conditions required for effective feedback delivery. Many stated the need for feedback to be open, truthful and honest, delivered with constructive intent, and the dangers of damaging self-esteem if poorly handled. Others noted dislike of feedback when it was formulaic, forced or overly structured. While others stressed the value of feedback from peers and subordinates, others prized feedback from line managers particularly. Some individuals highlighted the need for evidenced feedback; however, only one individual stressed the need to evaluate feedback critically before acceptance:

> *"Very important, being able to listen and analyse before evaluating validity I think is more important than accepting and changing."* Questionnaire respondent

A final theme related to organisational feedback practice; several people commented that while they considered feedback extremely important, they had seen many instances of poor practice. They also commented that developmental feedback was too often overlooked in the busyness of daily organisational life or if it was available, was overly focused on results/ task performance. However, they were conscious of their role in giving developmental feedback to their subordinates and modelling feedback for them. Lastly, several commented on how they would value more feedback, particularly from their line managers, but felt they would have to seek it out actively. However, some respondents were also suspicious of feedback from line managers and felt that feedback was not fully honest on occasion.

> *"It is extremely important - positive feedback can be motivating and less positive feedback is really important to understand - we cannot change without it. I think all*

too often, leaders shy away from providing negative feedback - I need to know my warts and all!." Questionnaire respondent

Further analysis and interpretation, along with a comparison with interview findings, are presented in section 4.3.1.

4.2 Results of leader interviews

This section presents a summary of the analysis of leader interview transcripts, resulting from the methods described in section 3.2.3 above. In order to facilitate comparisons with the HR and coach participant groups, findings are presented using the following headings:

- Context to data – an overview of the 12 interview participants and the feedback incidents they recounted (section 4.2.1)
- Recipient experiences of receiving feedback– the reported phenomenological experience of the leader participants in response to receiving (developmental) feedback from a provider. (Section 4.2.2)
- Recipient actions/changes – an overview of the types of change made by the participants and consequent reported actions. (Section 4.2.3).
- Recipient sense-making – how the leader participants explained their response to feedback and the conditions they felt led to feedback acceptance or rejection. Differences in recipient attitudes towards feedback, learning and change are also noted (Section 4.2.4)

Typical quotes from interview transcripts are used throughout to illustrate themes and discussion points. Discussion of findings from interview data is presented in section 4.3, alongside findings emerging from survey results as reported above.

4.2.1 Context to data

Overview of leader interview participants

As has been noted above in Section 4.1, the 12 interview participants broadly mirrored the questionnaire responses of the wider group. Demographically (see Appendix 12: Participant information) the interview group was predominantly male, reflecting the gender balance in the senior leadership population in both the questionnaire respondents and the wider study organisation. As with the questionnaire group, the interview participants were employed at senior management grades, holding senior operational or functional roles (e.g. VP, Plant Director, Head of Operations, Head of Finance) with significant man management and budgetary responsibilities. They also all had been previous attendees of the organisation's flagship leadership development programme and had therefore been exposed to a wide range of feedback beyond that provided by line relationships (e.g. psychometric assessments, 360º/ multi-rater feedback).

Both the interview group and questionnaire respondents were relatively mature individuals, sharing a similar age profile, with the majority in the 40-50 age category. Geographically, the interviewees were drawn from a more limited range of countries/ cultures (UK 3, Germany 4, Denmark 1 and USA 4). However, this aspect was not considered pertinent to the research questions under consideration. It is worth noting that whilst all interview participants were fluent in English, for 5 participants, this was not their native language, potentially impacting the precision with which they could articulate their experiences and perspectives.

Overview of feedback incidents

The 12 interviews elicited some 47 incidents of feedback, recalled with varying levels of detail, energy and emotion. In broad terms, the interviewees found it easier to recall incidents that resulted in some form of change (29 incidents) than those that did not (18 incidents). This may have been for reasons of social desirability rather than representing their day-to-day experience of feedback in organisational life. It is worth noting that 'change' was widely differently defined and ranged from relatively simple practical adjustments through to more radical and sustained changes in how the participant saw themselves and enacted leadership (see Section 4.2.3).

Table 4-9 below summarises the distribution of feedback incidents by source/type and perceived resulting outcome. Possible outcomes were classified as i) rapid acceptance of the feedback, ii) delayed acceptance, i.e. acceptance only after a period of reluctance, reflection or resistance, and iii) rejection of feedback, either outright or after reflection. It was apparent that it was relatively unusual for feedback to be accepted immediately and that most leaders needed time to reflect on feedback before choosing to accept and act upon it, especially when the feedback came as a surprise or when they did not recognise it. Where feedback was rejected, this tended to be more immediate, and often quite abrupt.

Feedback resulting in change came from a wide variety of sources, and consistent with the questionnaire findings (Table 4-1), the most important being 'in the line' sources, particularly the line manager. This feedback occurred either as ad hoc conversation, planned review or as part of a formal appraisal conversation. 'Out of line' sources also featured, with feedback received from peer strangers and family members. The balance was received from facilitated sources, the most significant being 360º/ multi-rater feedback - usually delivered by a member of Human Resources rather than an external coach or mentor.

In comparison, rejected feedback (leading to no change) was received overwhelmingly from line managers. The remainder of rejected feedback was divided equally between 360º/ multi-rater feedback, subordinate and psychometric feedback.

Table 4-9: Leader incidents by feedback source and the resultant outcome

		Outcome (No. incidents)		
Feedback source:		**Rapid Acceptance**	**Delayed Accceptance**	**No change**
Facilitated sources	360º/ multi-rater		**5**	**2**
	Development Centre		2	
	Psychometric			2
Coach/ Mentor		1	1	
Line relationships	Line Manager	2	**6**	**12**
	Peer colleague	4	3	
	Team member or subordinate	1	3	2
Training events	Leadership programme			
	Team development event			
Other, out of line	Peer stranger			
	Family, Friends or Doctor	1	1	
	Totals:	9	20	18

Table 4-10 below summarises the feedback incidents against the reported valence of the feedback, i.e. whether the participant reported the feedback as negative/critical, or positive/ affirmative. In approximate terms, there were as many incidents featuring negative/critical feedback (40% of all incidents) as positive feedback (39%), with the balance featuring a mixture of both. This finding differed from the questionnaire results but was not unexpected given the interview protocol requested examples of feedback resulting in change and no change.

However, perhaps surprisingly, in terms of effecting change, positive feedback was reported in a greater proportion of incidents than when only negative/critical feedback featured (41% vs 31%). Conversely, negative feedback was reported in a higher proportion of incidents resulting in no change (56%) than those narratives featuring positive feedback (33%).

Table 4-10: Leader incidents by outcome and valence of feedback

	Positive feedback	Mixed feedback	Negative/ Critical feedback	Total no (%) incidents
Incidents resulting in change	**12 (41%)**	8 (28%)	9 (31%)	29 (100%)
Incidents resulting in no change	6 (33%)	2 (11%)	**10 (56%)**	18 (100%)
No incidents	18 (39%)	10 (21%)	19 (40%)	47 (100%)

4.2.2 Recipient experience of receiving feedback

Across all 47 incidents, there appeared to be a wide variety of experiences of receiving feedback, ranging from complete surprise to a familiar reminder, and from a positive complement to a confronting challenge. Feedback was seen as logical and obvious, as well as affronting or emotionally charged. To summarise this complexity, incidents were organised into five types of (overlapping) phenomenological experience:

- Feeling affirmed
- Feeling confirmed
- Feeling an accumulative effect
- Feeling a conflict
- Feeling confronted or challenged.

Feeling affirmed

This category included positive feedback which appeared to be experienced as supportive and reinforcing of the individual. This feedback may or may not have been a surprise and may or may not result in change.

> *"…He was calling me, and he had a very emotional voice and basically saying 'Look, I appreciate that you got this job and I always believed in you', and of course I said, 'You were my first boss and you already gave me a chance to grow', for Germans to make such a call, it's not easy, for most Germans that is. He would not have done that if he did not believe in me 25 years ago and that he also is still interested to see how I progress".* L5-5, leader describing affirmative feedback from a previous line manager.

Feeling confirmed

This category included positive or negative feedback that the recipient appeared to recognise and viewed as validating their existing self-view, approach to leadership, or their view of their development needs. Confirmative positive feedback, whilst seemingly more readily accepted, tended to result in no change, whilst negative confirmative feedback served, for some, as a reminder and as a spur to make changes in their approach or behaviours.

> *"Well that makes you feel great, obviously, if there are things that you consciously try to do as a leader and people are giving that back to you, you feel like you've kind of set out what you were trying to practise to do, right?"* L6-1, L6 describing affirmative /confirmation of his approach to leadership.

> *"I know my problems, I know where I have a lot of room for improvement, therefore it's surprising me, when I get feedback, it's always linked mainly to these both subjects and therefore probably this impression or at least this comment, it's very close to where also I see my deficiencies, my incapabiltiies."* L9 describing agreement with negative confirmative feedback

Feeling an accumulative effect.

This category included feedback (of either valence) experienced as a repetition over time, or from many sources. Thus, recipients reported paying attention to feedback precisely because it came from many (often unrelated) sources.

> *"Because if you get this feedback, or similar feedback, if you get it more than once, then probably you start accepting it … and I guess if you get it more frequently, then I think it has a bigger impact, if it's always directed in a similar way then it gets more important."* L9, describing the impact of accumulating feedback from multiple sources

This accumulative impact was particularly noticeable in incidents featuring 360º/ multi-rater feedback where a similar message from many disparate individuals seemed to lend the feedback credibility and validity:

> *"The comments were really good as well and they directed me to again think about what I do. Everybody from [Line Manager] down, told me I worked too hard, put in too many hours, put too much pressure on myself, didn't delegate enough and people generally were concerned that those were things that weren't good for my health and weren't good*

for the business." L1 describing the impact of consistent feedback messages received as part of a 360°/ multi-rater feedback exercise

Accumulative feedback appeared, therefore, often associated with higher levels of acceptance and consequent change. However, where there were contradictions within the data, this undermined or devalued the data and led to consequent rejection.

Feeling a conflict

This category was (usually but not always) negative feedback experienced as discrepant with the recipient's view, which appeared often associated with some level of dissonance or negative affect but not necessarily surprise. This sort of experience ranged from feedback that conflicted with the recipient's sense of logic, values or beliefs, or at a deeper level, their self-image. Response to this sort of feedback looked more clearly binary – either outright rejection or a more radical reconsideration of assumptions and beliefs following, usually following a period of reflection.

> *"He said, 'It's not how we should run the business, the business should come first, and your family come second'. Feedback to me that is like this was not good; this is not the right management style ... I don't agree with that."* L2-4, leader describing rejecting line managers feedback due to difference in beliefs

> *"I did not recognise their frustration or their meaning about me by my own, I believed that I'm watching my behaviour and that I'm reflecting what others tell me … so I was wrong in my judgement, in my view of myself and the process around me."* L4 describing discrepant feedback conflicting with own self-view

Feeling confronted or challenged.

Confronting feedback (of either valence) was characterised as a challenge combined with a forceful demand for change. This appeared often as a surprise, an ultimatum or as a 'wake-up' call and was often blurred with some form of an injunction or direct instructions to the recipient, particularly when given by a line manager. This appeared to be a particularly effective form of feedback for eliciting change when given by a respected line manager or associated with some level of threat or overt use of power. However, when delivered by a disrespected individual, this sort of feedback experience tended to result in compliance and half-hearted implementation.

> *"Look, stop questioning what you're doing or your judgment or your ability, just get on and do it because if we as the leaders of the business didn't have confidence in you, you wouldn't be in your position*." L1-1, leader describing positive confronting feedback

> *"Our boss, came to us and asked us for a meeting and he said 'Look, I like both of you, you are both strong leaders but if you start fighting against each other, there will be only space for one of you'. He left us alone …but this was also very impactful having feedback which needed some change."* L4-2, leader describing negative confronting feedback

Table 4-11below maps the 47 recounted incidents against reported experience and against whether that particular incident resulted in any change. Numbers in columns refer to the incident identifier number, and colour indicates the valence of feedback featured. For example, **'-5'** in column L1, indicates that incident L1-5 (the fifth story told by participant L1), featured negative feedback, and was experienced as confronting/ challenging.

Table 4-11: Mapping of recounted incidents by type of experience and the resultant outcome

		Leader interview identifier											
	Feedback perceived as	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	L7	L8	L9	L10	L11	L12
Feedback resulting in change	*Affirming*	+1 +2 +3 +4	+2	+1		+2 +5	=1		+1 +2		=1 +3	+3	
	Confirming					+2	=2	=3			=1 +3	=1 +3	
	Accumulating	+1 +4					=1		+2	-2	=1	+3	
	Conflicting				-1	-1	=1			-1			-2
	Confronting/ challenging	+1 +3 +4 -5	-1	+1	-2	-1	=4	=2 =3	+1 +2 =4	-1 -2		=1	-1 -2
Feedback resulting in no change	*Affirming*	+6	+3	+2	+4	+3							
	Confirming			+2 +3	+4	+3				=3			
	Accumulating												
	Conflicting		-4 -5		-3	-4	-3	-3	-3		=2	-2	-3 -4
	Confronting/ challenging				-3								

[Key: + indicates recall of positive feedback, = indicates recall of mixed positive and negative feedback, - indicates recall of negative feedback. Numbers in columns refer to unique incident identifier]

It is apparent from Table 4-11 that change-resulting incidents were more likely to feature positive affirming feedback, or confronting/ challenging feedback (positive and negative). In contrast, incidents resulting in no change were more likely to feature feedback experienced as conflicting.

4.2.3 Recipient actions/changes – types of change made by recipients.

As noted above the degree of change in response to feedback reported by the participants varied enormously, ranging from relatively superficial/ minor changes in working practices to much more fundamental and transformative reappraisals of self-image and sense of self-efficacy. These fell into four (sometimes overlapping) types of change, explored in the balance of the section:

- Being sensitised to their impact on others
- Making practical changes to approach/ behaviours
- Strengthening the sense of self/ approach
- Re-aligning the self-image

Being sensitised to their impact on others

In this form of change, the feedback recipient reported receiving critical feedback (or the negative elements of mixed feedback) about their behaviour or their potential (negative) impact on others. This feedback appeared to have the effect of sensitising participants to the impact of their behaviours and often led to increased self-monitoring. However, in many cases, greater awareness of their impact on others also seemed to precipitate practical changes.

"Before meetings, I was reminding me and remembering me on my task, I had a small post-it on my desk let's say, for a while, to keep me awake" L4 describing how he reminded himself of feedback received.

"Well, one girl started crying so ... that was hard for me, that I had obviously really hurt this person because I do not like to hurt people, so that was hard for me, after the session was over, next time I visited her plant, I apologised for what I'd done to upset her and again, I tried to be very much more considerate to her" L6 describing being sensitised to his impact on a subordinate and making consequent change.

Making practical changes to approach.

All participants reported some form of practical action, and they were able to talk about the minor and major alterations they had made to their approach or behaviours once they accepted that change was necessary. For many, the feedback was experienced as relatively impersonal, with the changes requested seen as both logical and relatively easy to make, requiring no deep introspection or prolonged reflection. In these circumstances the recipient leader appeared to implement practical change relatively quickly, for example, in their ways of working:

> *"At the earliest opportunity, I added to my team, a finance person, I added a numbers person so to make up for my weakness, I found the best person out there to manage the numbers. I'm plugging it with a resource, and I am making an effort to be let's say, spend more time in that part of the business, probably need to spend even more*

so but yes, that's been the fix for me." L10-1 describing rapid implementation changes following 360º/ multi-rater feedback.

In contrast to this form of 'quick fix' response, for others, the feedback seemed to provoke greater self-reflection. For example, for some, the feedback appeared to inspire the leader to reconsider aspects of their leadership style and instigate experimentation with new behaviours. For example, L1 described shifting his style of leadership as follows:

> *"I sort of kept checking and balancing, and I also said, 'A leopard doesn't change its spots, but you can perhaps dilute them a little bit', and I asked them to say, 'Is this working or not?' and particularly for things like delegation, I actively strove to do that more and move from a telling to a mentoring type relationship with the people I worked with."* L1 describing experimenting with leadership style and behaviours.

For others, the feedback appeared to highlight a discrepancy between the sort of leader they wanted to be, and the reality experienced by others. This form of change seemed as much entangled with the leader's inner sense of self and their value system as with their outer behaviours, provoking self-reflection on their personal values and beliefs as well as their approach to leadership. Feedback for this group seemed altogether more personal as well as professional. Changes made therefore appeared motivated to close a perceived gap in behaviours and ensure consistency with the self-image:

> *"This is my own target, expectation, it's one of my values, to be honest and to be open and considering everybody the same is important to me, but the feedback was that when I'm in action, I don't consider others as equally important or equally right."* L4, describing the sense of not living up to his personal value system

Strengthening the sense of self.

In this form of change, the recipient leaders appeared to feel a greater sense of self-confidence and self-efficacy as a result of receiving feedback. Unsurprisingly, this was usually associated with positive feedback (or the positive element of mixed feedback). The effects of this feedback seemed to be superficial for most, but for a noticeable few (L1, L3 and L8) profoundly impacting. In these instances, affirmative, positive feedback appeared to have the effect of nullifying a previously imbibed negative message, with empowering results:

> *"I remember feeling quite chuffed… it kind of cemented what had been happening all week about my sense of self confidence. That it was misplaced but it wasn't a problem, and that feedback I'd had through my manager previously, about not liking conflict and being a bit unconfident was... if it had been true at the time, it wasn't true anymore. So I do remember feeling quite high at the end of that discussion, in terms of things were much better than I thought they were, and I can really do something from here"* L3-1, reporting increases sense of self-confidence as a result of receiving positive affirmative feedback from a peer stranger during a training programme.

Re-aligning self-image.

While in the majority of incidents changes made were relatively minor/ practical, three participant leaders (L1, L3, L8) reported more radical and long-lasting changes to their self-image as well as their behaviours. In their narratives, the positive feedback received appeared to cause a deep emotional reaction, precipitating introspection and reconsideration of their sense of self. As well as substantial increases in self-confidence and self-efficacy, they also reported significant and sustained shifts in behaviours, relating style, priorities and personal ambitions. These positive shifts in self-belief appear to have resulted in increased personal impact and improved results – creating a 'virtuous circle' which further reinforced the individual's sense of self-worth.

> *"By the time I came back from that course, having thought about it, I came back far more confident and willing to sort of stand up for my point of view – appropriately – and I remember coming back thinking I'm not going to let people upset me to that extent, I'm going to be confident, I'm not going to be bothered by the tone of emails and the way people speak to me, I'll focus on my own values and ensure that I am delivering what's expected. To be honest, I came back a changed person, to the extent that I'd only been back a week and my boss said, 'Something's changed, I think it's for the better, what on earth's happened?'." L8, describing the impact of positive feedback from a peer stranger*

> *Whilst it doesn't translate into a specific one-time action, what it did lead me to do, was explore a bit, and play a little bit. I realised that I often gave my power away by justifying myself or trying to second guess other people. I started just sometimes to be a bit cheeky, just say exactly what I wanted. Other times I just needed to tell them, and I guess it's that sense of strength and power where I now am more happy to say, 'No it's like this'. Or if I'm asked why, I say, 'Well that's what I've decided'."*
>
> L3 describing the impact of positive peer feedback

Table 4-12 below summarises these findings, plotting incident number and feedback valence against the type of change reported. This suggests that if feedback results in change, it is more likely to result in practical outcomes or a strengthening of the sense of self.

Table 4-12: Comparison of incident valence against the type of outcome reported

		Leader interview identifier:											
		L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	L7	L8	L9	L10	L11	L12
Changes made	*Being sensitised*				-1	-1	=1	=2		-1 -2		=1	-1 -2
	Making practical changes	+1 +2 +4 -5	-1	+1	-1 -2	-1	=1	=1	+1 +2 =4	-1 -2	=1	=1	-1 -2
	Strengthening self or approach	+1 +2 +3 +4	+2	+1		+2 +5	=1 =2 =4		+1 +2		=1 +3	+3	
	Re-aligning the self-image	+3 +4		+1					+1 +2				
	Rejection/no change	+6	+3 -4 -5	+2 +3	-3 +4	+3 -4	-3	-3	=3	-3	=2	-2	-3 -4

[Key: + indicates recall of incident featuring positive feedback, = indicates recall of incident featuring mixed positive and negative feedback, - indicates recall of incident featuring negative feedback. Numbers in columns refer to unique incident identifier]

4.2.4 Recipient sense-making - explaining responses to feedback

As well as being asked to report their lived experience of receiving feedback and resultant changes, the participant leaders were asked to share the reasons they felt had led them to accept or reject feedback. This section contains a summary of how participants explained their responses and the conditions they perceived that lead to i) acceptance or ii) rejection of feedback in general. The final part of this section details participants varied attitudes to feedback and how this coloured their response.

Reasons given for accepting feedback

The participants stressed the overriding importance of a trusting relationship between the provider and recipient as the precursor to any feedback exchange. A climate of psychological safety allowed, they perceived, direct, sincere and honest feedback-giving and indeed exchange. Several also stipulated the characteristics and importance of constructive delivery, including appropriate timing and sensitivity to feelings and individual circumstances. However, where a strong relationship existed and the positive intent of the provider was beyond doubt, the quality of delivery appeared secondary and direct (even blunt) feedback could be delivered on occasion without defensiveness or rejection:

> *"I put it down to his personal style, so it wasn't from a textbook, he'd shoot from the hip and he might be effing and blinding you, but he would make it very clear that you had his full confidence and if it did go wrong, well that's part of life's learning cycle."* L1 describing blunt feedback from his line manager

Many of the leaders described the credibility of feedback from a trusted and respected line manager or peer with whom a deep bond had been formed over considerable time. Perceived feedback validity was, therefore, a function of the depth of relationship as well as direct evidence derived from working together over time. This relationship effect also extended to acceptance of 360º/ multi-rater feedback where the raters were trusted and respected. In these cases, the relationship with the feedback provider (e.g. a coach or HR personnel) was of less importance than the trustworthiness of the source data, as long as it was caringly and sensitively delivered.

It is worth noting, however, that some of the most impactful feedback appeared to come from peer strangers with minimal experience of the participant and therefore limited relationship. This finding would initially appear to contradict the importance of a trusting relationship between provider and recipient. However, their very distance from the provider rendered them as trustworthy, as an unbiased, objective and therefore credible source.

> *"And those were the ones that actually made more of an impression, because they were saying the same things but having spent less time with me, and kind of reinforced the message even more."* L3 describing credible feedback from peer strangers

There was also general agreement that feedback should be considerately delivered. This aspect included ensuring that feedback was tailored to the recipient's needs and contextualised to the recipient's situation. The participants, whilst accepting that feedback might have a critical element, wanted to see this couched in positive terms, striking a balance between being overly harsh or too rosy. A supportive, safe environment was felt to be necessary, and several mentioned the use of non-directive questioning from the provider as valuable to explore feedback messages and design future action. Above all, the recipients wanted to avoid being told off or belittled by the feedback provider.

> *"The thing that really stuck with me was the final half hour, where we all on our table group gave each other probably the most adult feedback I've ever had. It was in a very safe place, because we'd all got to know each other, and you also probably knew that you'd be unlikely to bump into each other that often in the future. But it was also*

given with everybody in the same boat, wanting to improve." L3 describing a sense of safety in receiving feedback on a training course.

"It was a bit sterile because it was over the phone, but the person that did it came across as very caring about what she was doing, that the process meant a lot to her and because it was in the diary for an hour and it went on for two and a half hours, she let it go through the full process and turned it into a positive and explored some of the other issues that I was perhaps wrestling with myself prior to ... rather than just reading aloud a piece of paper that gave you the feedback, she was interpreting between the lines because she was experienced at doing that. So, I found that a really powerful session." L1 describing caring feedback from an HR professional debriefing 360º/ multi-rater feedback.

Beyond this, there was less agreement regarding the conditions required for effective feedback provision. It was noticeable that participants laid more emphasis on the need for evidence and examples when they were receiving feedback from less trusted sources. There was also more discussion of the need for constructive delivery when a less trusted colleague was involved.

While there was a consensus that feedback giving should be non-formulaic, there was disagreement regarding the need for 'balance', i.e. always leavening criticism with positive comments as advocated by some feedback models (Just, 2007). While some saw this as essential, others believed this was secondary to delivering an authentic message:

> *"You see it today with businesses, you must go round and say hello to everybody, you must go and say well done, I don't think that's necessarily true, you should do it when it's appropriate and you should do it with sincerity and meaning and consideration. If you do that, then it's constructive, whether it's positive or negative."* L3 describing a dislike of formulaic feedback

There was also some disagreement about whether feedback should be a continuous or a discontinuous dialogue, with some arguing that the organisation's appraisal conversations were too infrequent and feedback from their line manager too irregular. However, others argued, that spontaneous unforced dialogue was more valuable, and therefore should not be planned or proscribed by the organisation's policies and procedures.

A subset of participants was particularly insistent that credible feedback should always point out weaknesses, i.e. regarded purely positive feedback as irrelevant or lacking validity. In general, there was little discussion of leveraging strengths or positive feedback as a source of change, even though this was the experience of some participants.

Lastly, a few participants talked about the need for feedback to point to practical action, seeing feedback as pointless without clarity on what to improve and how to go about it.

Reasons given for rejecting feedback

It might be expected that critical/negative feedback would be cited as a prime reason for feedback rejection. However, while negative feedback featured in a majority of rejection incidents, this was not true in all cases. Instead, the leader participants gave four broad reasons for rejecting feedback, mirroring to a large extent those given for acceptance:

- Coming from a distrusted provider/source
- Lacking criticality/honesty
- Providing insufficient logic/data to support change
- Conflicting with own values, beliefs or identity

- *Coming from a distrusted provider source.* Across all participants, feedback that was perceived as originating from a distrusted provider (often a line manager) or a distrusted source was cited as the main reason for rejection. Notably and unexpectedly, even positive feedback was regarded with suspicion if the provider was disliked/ distrusted:

  "So, it wasn't so much he gave me negative feedback, he tried to give me positive feedback, but it came across negatively in the way he delivered [it] and he backed it up with negative actions, which to me ... I'm pretty honest, straight and forthright and when you don't get that environment to work in, it doesn't do it for me." L1 describing feedback from a distrusted line manager

  Included in this category were two incidents of psychometric feedback where there were suspicions of the premise/ provenance of a particular instrument:

  "… they could have been giving that test to shoe salesmen as easily to people in my industry, they could have been giving it to computer salesmen or copier salesmen, , so I immediately even before taking it, felt disdain for the process." L7 talking about distrust of psychometric feedback.

- *Lacking criticality/ honesty.* If feedback was entirely positive or perceived as lacking criticality, many leaders were inclined to see this as disingenuous or dishonest and therefore discounted.

"*... And he'd come in, we'd be talking about things and he'd be saying, 'This is brilliant, you're doing the right thing here, you're just the man for the job' and all that sort of stuff, when he'd walk out the door, I'd think 'That was a load of bullshit'. In fact, it's to the point where I don't even trust what he's telling me, if he told me it was night, I'd look out the window because there was just something about the way he said it and the body language wasn't right, the phraseology wasn't right and the context wasn't right, he just wasn't consistent."* L1 describing distrust of positive feedback from a distrusted provider.

In a similar vein, the feedback was seen as of little value if the provider (or source) did not point to any development 'gaps' or practical areas for improvement. So, for example, positive 360º/ multi-rater feedback was seen as irrelevant if it failed to highlight areas of weakness:

"It was all very nice, but when I sat down and explored what it meant, aside from delegating more, which is what my team had said, they wanted me to give them more stuff. There was a lot of good stuff about, she's supportive, she's diligent and all this kind of thing, but I've heard that for years. It just didn't translate into any gaps." L3 describing their response to positive 360º/ multi-rater feedback.

- *Providing insufficient logic or data in support.* For some recipients, a lack of supporting data or perceived logic invalidated the feedback. In these circumstances, the feedback was either ignored or was acted on without personal commitment.

  "I never actually really found out where he got the perception from and I didn't agree with it and also sought out, from some of the other players, some of the peers in the team, what their perception was and none of the others, at least they wouldn't admit to me, none of the others appeared to have the same perception, so that was a bit of feedback that I never did anything with because I couldn't find any grounds for it, he wasn't really able to explain it well and therefore I just let it go." L11-2 describing the rejection of unsubstantiated feedback from a line manager.

- *Conflicting with values/ beliefs/ self-image.* Finally, the feedback was also rejected if the recipient felt it conflicted in some way with their personal values or contradicted some aspect of their beliefs/values/ self-perception, particularly when it was held as inviolate or immutable characteristic of the individual:

  "But I don't want to do that, I don't want to change my character which I develop now for many years, I don't want to do that, not because I'm not able to but because it's not my character." L4 describing rejecting feedback as inconsistent with the sense of self.

  "So why didn't I change? I was not able to change. Because he was really asking me to behave against my core values." L5 describing rejecting feedback as inconsistent with personal values.

Table 4-13 below summarises these findings by plotting incident number and valence against the reason(s) given for rejection. This table suggests that a distrusted source was the most common reason given for rejection, followed by some sort of conflict with personal values, beliefs or identity. Positive feedback was most likely to be rejected on the grounds of lacking criticality or full honesty.

Table 4-13: Comparison of incidents by feedback valence and the reason for rejection.

	Leader interview identifier:											
Reason for rejection:	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6	L7	L8	L9	L10	L11	L12
From a distrusted source	+6	**-4** **-5**	+3	**-3**		**-3**		**=3**	**-3**	**=2**		**-4**
Lacking criticality/ honesty	+6	+3	+2 +3	+4	+3							
Insufficient logic/ data to support		**-5**	+3				**-3**				**-2**	**-4**
Conflicting with values, beliefs, or identity		**-4**		**-3**	**-4**	**-3**		**=3**		**=2**	**-2**	**=3**

[Key – as Table 4-12]

Recipient attitudes to feedback

A noticeable and unexpected feature of the accounts was how the participants differently described themselves and their relationship to feedback and personal change. As has been mentioned above, three participants in particular (L1, L3 and L8) reported quite profound shifts in self-belief and behaviour, all in response to positive, affirmative and supportive feedback. This group of individuals also reported low levels of self-belief and as experiencing considerable self-doubt. They described themselves as being very open for feedback, particularly seeking and valuing critical feedback when it pointed to tangible areas for improvement.

> *"I've held reasonable positions in the business, and whilst I've progressed to a reasonably high level in the business, I perhaps haven't been as confident in my own leadership ability as I perhaps outwardly appear* " L1 describing low self-confidence.

> *"Yes, which might be my mentality, I guess I'm more pessimistic. Almost like you tell me loads of positives, and I'm like, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, but what about the negatives?'."* L3 describing desire critical feedback.

In contrast to this 'self-doubter' group, a different group of four leaders (L4, L5, L9, L12) presented in the interviews much more confidently, expressing a stronger sense of their own identity, values and beliefs and often describing themselves in terms of being a 'fixed' character or entity. While this 'self-certain' group would seek feedback, it tended to be from significant line managers or close family members on a need's basis. This group also tended to focus more on negative feedback received and would explain feedback rejection based on a clash with their personal values:

> *"I think I'm coming back to the set of values …, so for me it's absolutely hard to make a compromise, that's not possible for me"* L12 describing rejecting feedback because of a values clash.

The remaining five leaders did not fall clearly into the 'self-doubter' or the 'self-certain' groups, showing tendencies of both. While they presented as confident individuals, in contrast to the self-certain group, they appeared more willing to consider (but not necessarily act on) feedback, describing proactive feedback-seeking from others. This group tended to report their feedback stories in more balanced terms, not just focusing on the negative components as in the 'self-certain' group.

> *"I had a number of bosses who put me straight and helped me to understand, who actually also addressed what was good behaviour and what's not good behaviour, where could I improve, where could I do better, what was the good stuff and things like that and there was a number of them" L7 describing valuing balanced feedback.*

> *"I would say yes, I do. I feel comfortable with [seeking feedback]. Because I find myself with a new organisation, new bosses, I find myself reaching out more, asking 'Is this how you want it, is this what you want, am I doing this ...', because if you've been in a team for a long time, you know two moves ahead what's going to happen. In a new team, you have to gain that familiarity, so I tend to be asking the questions these days much more, so I do get the feedback, 'I don't want to see it this way, I want to see it this way', that sort of thing." L10 describing active feedback seeking.*

Surprisingly these three groups reported distinct differences in, firstly, the valence of feedback recalled in the incidents they recounted, and secondly the level of impact reported. Table 4-14 and Table 4-15 below re-present Table 4-12 and Table 4-13 above, ordering the participants according to the apparent level of self-doubt/ self-certainty presented in the interview accounts.

Table 4-14: Comparison of interviewees by incident recall and reported change impact

Higher Self-doubt ⟷ **Higher Self-certainty**

	L1	L3	L8	L2	L6	L7	L10	L11	L4	L5	L9	L12
Sensitised to impact on others					±1	=2		=1	-1	-1	-1 -2	-1 -2
Practical changes to approach	+1 +2 +4 -5	+1	+1 +2 =4	-1	=1 =2 =4	=1	=1	=1	-1	-1	-1 -2	-1 -2
Strengthened self or approach	+1 +2 +3 +4	+1	+1 +2	+2	=1		=1 +3	-2 =3		+2 +5		
Re-alignment of self-image	+3 +4	+1	+1 +2									

[Key: as Table 4-12]

Table 4-15: Comparison of incidents recalled by reasons for rejecting feedback

Higher Self-doubt ⟷ **Higher Self-certainty**

	L1	L3	L8	L2	L6	L7	L10	L11	L4	L5	L9	L12
From a distrusted source	**+6**	**+3**	**=3**	**-4** **-5**	**-3**		**=2**		**-3**		**-3**	**-4**
Lacking criticality/ honesty	**+6**	**+2** **+3**		**+3**					**+4**	**+3**		
Insufficient logic/ data to support		**+3**		**-5**		**-3**		**-2**				**-2**
Conflicting with values, beliefs, or identity			**=3**	**-4**	**-3**		**=2**	**-2**	**-3**	**-4**		**=3**

[Key: as Table 4-12]

The Self-doubter group reported being highly impacted by the positive feedback received, recounting their stories at length, with evident emotion and vivid metaphors (e.g. 'rammed home', 'clicked', 'landed'). This group, as mentioned above, reported radical shifts in their sense of self-worth as a result of this feedback which was apparently translated into wide-ranging and sustained changes in behaviours and personal effectiveness.

> *"It certainly hasn't gone backwards, if anything, it's developed more and more because what I started to find was that if you were a bit more robust in your challenge – appropriately – if you did come across as more confident in your communications, if you did prepare, all of a sudden instead of perhaps abrupt emails, that type of thing, you actually got a lot of respect back, to being involved in more things, I was getting far fewer pieces of communication that I felt intimidating, it was almost as if acting more confidently and preparing better, was starting to have the effect I wanted it to, which was that people were more confident in my ability, people were clearly no longer doubting whether I was running my little team correctly. It was almost as if 'Ah, now he's acting like a leader, now we are seeing the confidence we expect of someone like that' ."* L8 describing the sustained impact of increased self-confidence.

The Self-doubters appeared to be fundamentally affirmed by the positive feedback received however, had the most difficulties in accepting it. Conversely, they reported a thirst for criticism, and seemed the most distrusting of feedback they saw as 'overly positive'. Positive feedback appeared, therefore, only accepted when there was overwhelming evidence (accumulative feedback), or when it was delivered by in a forceful/ direct manner from a trusted and respected source (confronting feedback). In contrast, they appeared most open to negative feedback, which seemed to confirm their existing (doubting) self-image.

In contrast, the Self-certain group appeared to respond to the (mostly critical/negative) feedback in a more complex way but with potentially less consequential and sustained change. Most of these accounts were reported in a lower emotional tone compared to the 'Self-doubters', with their stories recounted in a more perfunctory 'problem-solving' manner. They reported two types of change predominantly. Firstly, immediate practical/ tactical changes to their relating style or practical approach to correct a criticism or secondly, greater awareness of their impact on others, but without necessarily making any substantive practical changes. There was also less evidence of sustained self-reinforcing changes once initial corrections had been made, although some leaders checked with trusted colleagues to ensure that the 'fault was fixed'.

Of the few cases of receiving positive feedback, in contrast to the Self-doubter group, the self-certain appeared to experience this as only affirmative or confirmative. However, negative/critical feedback seemed to be experienced as potentially strongly conflicting with their values & beliefs, or their sense of logic. This sense of challenge appeared heightened when delivered in a confronting manner or by a line authority. Many of the interviewees reported taking time to reflect on the feedback before they could accept it, albeit often half-heartedly. None of this group described themselves as resistant to feedback, instead, explaining that the feedback was contradictory.

While this group seemed less 'permeable' to feedback, negative feedback appeared broadly accepted and acted on under three circumstances. Firstly, the feedback was seen as fair if it was well evidenced, logical/ rational, perhaps representing a perspective they had overlooked or not seen for themselves. Secondly, the feedback was accepted if the benefit of accepting it clearly exceeded the benefit of ignoring it. Thus, several leaders in this group reported acceding to a change they disagreed with, in order to preserve or protect a broader agenda, e.g. relationship with line manager, career prospects.

> *"I was not fighting [him] anymore. I still didn't agree with his priorities. I was not fighting anymore. Let's say before I was trying to explain to him that his priorities were wrong. Afterwards, I think I didn't change so much my working style or taking on board his priorities, but I stopped telling him that he is wrong." (L4)*

Thirdly, deeper self-reflection appeared triggered when their behaviours were perceived as in conflict with their inner self-image. Any corrections then appeared taken to realign behaviours with the existing self-image rather than modify the self-image as in the case of the 'Self-doubter' group.

In the remainder of participants, as noted, there were similarities with both the 'self-doubters' and the 'self-certain'; however, feedback appeared to have more practical than personal outcomes. Positive aspects of feedback seemed experienced as affirming and confirmatory of their existing approaches to leadership and self-image. Negative feedback appeared experienced as confronting or conflicting, as with the 'self-certain', but with more apparent willingness to pause, reflect and evaluate it than in the 'self-certain' group.

These differences in relating to feedback are further explored and interpreted in section 4.3.2 below.

4.3 Analysis and interpretation of leader findings

The following section presents an analysis and personal interpretation of the survey and interview findings. Comparisons are made between these two sources, noting points of similarity and difference. Conceptualisations arising from the data in relation to i) recipient experiences of feedback, ii) recipient feedback 'permeability' are offered, and iii) conditions impacting feedback outcomes, are offered.

4.3.1 Interpretation of questionnaire results

Memorability/ Applicability of different sources of feedback

The questionnaire asked participants to recall incidents of feedback which had been particularly memorable for them. The questionnaire, (see Table 4-1and Figure 4-1 above) demonstrates a range of memorability across a wide variety of feedback sources but particularly highlights the relative importance of feedback from key personal relationships, i.e. line managers, peers, subordinates and family. High memorability scores were also given to 360º/ multi-rater feedback, and it could be argued that this form of feedback is considered potent because of its trusted provenance. This finding was confirmed in large part by the interview participants, who valued 360º/ multi-rater feedback precisely because it derived from a number of trusted sources.

The interview data also echoed the importance of a trusted relationship with the feedback provider. In particular, the interview participants saw line manager feedback as a particularly impactful source of feedback, cited as the most significant source of both accepted and rejected feedback (see Table 4-9). This finding suggests that the quality of the relationship with the line manager is critical to likely acceptance or rejection of feedback. The importance of line manager feedback is not surprising given their positions of authority and power in the organisational hierarchy and is consistent with feedback literature (Tourish and Tourish, 2012) which debates how hierarchical relationships influence feedback. However, the degree to which rejected feedback originated from the line manager was unexpected and has important consequences for the enablement of development within some subordinate-manager relationships.

Notably, few of the questionnaire respondents felt feedback from a coach/mentor applied to them, and none of the interview participants cited examples of working with a coach. However, this most likely suggests, given cost considerations, that few leaders in the study organisation had access to an external coach, rather than feedback from coaches being necessarily ineffective. Similarly, few leaders mentioned feedback from an HR professional as memorable feedback, focusing more on the message delivered.

Approximately a third of the questionnaire respondents indicated that psychometric feedback did not apply to them. This is curious given that all the questionnaire respondents had received psychometric feedback as part of their attendance on the organisation's leadership programme. This finding might suggest that psychometric feedback is mostly unmemorable, corroborated to some extent by the interview accounts. However, this is an area that would be worthy of further investigation, given the prominence of such instruments in leadership development programmes and their use by coaches.

Factors affecting feedback acceptance and change materialisation

The responses to the questionnaire suggest the following as influencing acceptance or rejection of feedback:

- *Instigation* (Table 4-3/Figure 4-3) – the questionnaire data suggests instigation of feedback is usually a joint enterprise between the recipient and the provider, and that feedback-seeking is less usual. This finding is a somewhat surprising result when compared with the interview data, which suggested that instigation of feedback was more usually at other's behest. However, the interview data corroborated that active feedback-seeking, i.e. deliberately requesting feedback on their leadership behaviours, is relatively unusual, and not necessarily perceived well by others. The responses to the questionnaire may therefore confirm studies that suggest that feedback-seeking behaviour is highly task and goal orientated, occurring in circumstances of particular need (Milward-Purvis et al., 2010). Further investigation may be warranted into the extent to which feedback-seeking behaviours predispose recipients to greater feedback receptivity and increased levels of acceptance.

- *Perceived valence* (Table 4-4/Figure 4-4) – surprisingly, there was a strong predominance of feedback recalled as all or mostly positive, with relatively few incidents of negative feedback. This was partially corroborated by the interview participants, where it was noticeably more difficult for participants to recall incidents of rejected (and therefore negative/ critical) feedback. The questionnaire results might again be explained by social desirability or self-protective factors (i.e., reluctance to recall criticism) or might suggest that giving positive feedback is an under-explored area in organisational life.

- *Degree of agreement* (Table 4-5/ Figure 4-5 above and Table 4-16 below) – not surprisingly the questionnaire respondents generally reported a high degree of agreement with the (positive) feedback they had received, with very few respondents suggesting any degree of disagreement. This finding was corroborated by the interview participants, who expressed greater degrees of discomfort and disagreement with negative messages which they saw as conflicting with or confronting their self-view. However, the interviews also featured examples of the rejection of positive feedback on the grounds of lacking criticality. This implies that agreement with feedback is not a simple matter, purely dependent on valence, as suggested by Kluger and DeNisi (1998).

Table 4-16: Cross-tabulation of 'valence' against 'agreement' responses (% Questionnaire respondents)

	Totally agreed	Mostly agreed	Somewhat agreed	Somewhat disagreed	Mostly disagreed	Total
All positive	4.2	4.9	2.8	0.7	0.0	12.5
Mostly positive	5.6	54.2	3.5	0.7	0.0	63.9
Somewhat positive	0.7	4.9	5.6	1.4	0.0	12.5
Somewhat negative	1.4	2.8	1.4	2.8	0.7	9.0
Mostly negative	0.0	0.0	1.4	0.7	0.0	2.1
	11.8	66.7	14.6	6.3	0.7	**100.0**

- *Degree of surprise (Table 4-6/Figure 4-6)* – The questionnaire data suggests that the majority of respondents were familiar to some degree with the feedback messages, and it was unusual for a respondent to report being completely surprised. This finding echoed in the participant interviews, where it was common for them to report prior awareness of feedback messages. This finding was an unexpected feature of the data suggesting that leaders are often well aware of feedback messages, running counter to the prevalent narrative of the ‘unaware leader. This again might have been biased for reasons of social desirability, i.e., reluctance to admit to being unaware about some aspect of self.

- *Desire to change* (Figure 4-7 above and Table 4-17 below) – the questionnaire participants reported a moderate to strong desire to change. This was somewhat unexpected given most had received mainly familiar and positive feedback, given the literature often suggests (negative) discrepancy reduction drives change. This response might also be explained by social desirability factors or suggest that positive feedback is more than merely affirmative in its effect. This latter point was corroborated in part by the interview participants who reported increases in self-confidence as well as practical changes, in response to receiving positive feedback (see section Recipient actions/changes 4.2.3)

In further comparing ‘desire to change’ and ‘change materialisation’, there was a tendency for the strength of desire to be associated with the degree of change. However, while not surprising, this was far from a perfect relationship with considerable variance in response.

Table 4-17: Cross-tabulation of 'Desire to change against 'Change materialisation' responses (% Questionnaire respondents)

	Degree of change materialisation				
	A great extent	A moderate extent	A limited extent	Not at all	Total
Strong desire to change	4.2	4.2	1.4	0.0	9.7
Desire to change	4.9	**29.9**	7.6	0.0	42.4
Moderate desire to change	2.8	16.0	5.6	0.0	24.3
Small desire to change	0.0	3.5	13.9	0.7	18.1
No desire to change	0.0	0.7	2.8	2.1	5.6
Total incidents	11.8	54.2	31.3	2.8	100.0

Factors affecting the extent of change materialisation

In order to examine relationships between factors, questionnaire responses were categorised according to the extent of change respondents perceived as having materialised. This analysis potentially revealed some further nuances that were not apparent from the whole data set. However, findings must be regarded with some caution, given the small numbers of participants in some categories.

- *Instigation* – Figure 4-9 below suggests that greater levels of change link with self-instigation. This conclusion would make sense if self-instigation was associated with a greater sense of personal control over feedback reception and would suggest that feedback-seeking behaviours may be associated with feedback receptivity. This aspect would warrant further investigation and has important implications for how recipients are engaged in feedback conversations.

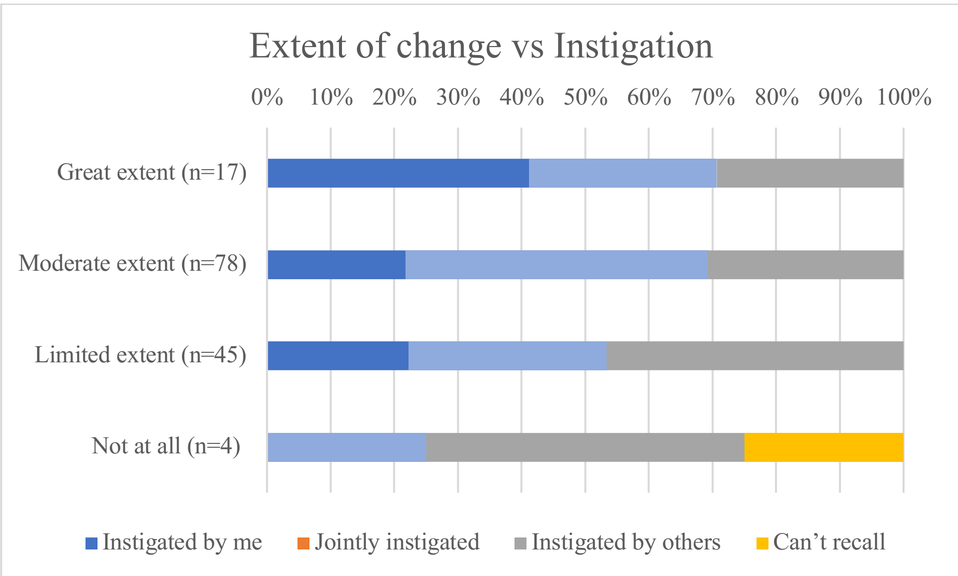

Figure 4-9: Comparison of the extent of change with instigation

- *Perceived valence* – Figure 4-10 below suggests that those who made a change to 'a great extent' were less likely to recall the feedback they received as 'all positive'. This might suggest those that those who construe feedback in purely positive terms are more likely to ignore it, or that critical/negative elements are perceived as the main spur to change. This latter point received some corroboration from the participant interviewees who stressed the value of negative/ critical feedback as the route to self-improve. This might suggest that many hold a deficit model of change, even if this was not borne out by the evidence from the interviews, with changes as likely to come from positive feedback as negative criticism (see Table 4-12).

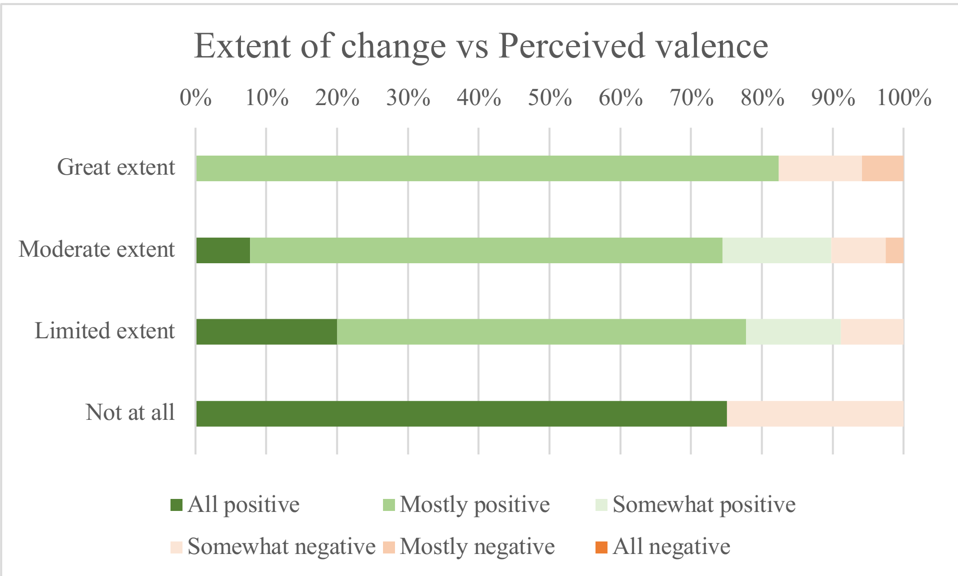

Figure 4-10: Comparison of the extent of change with perceived valence.

- *Degree of agreement* –Figure 4-11 below demonstrates the importance of a high level of agreement with feedback in order for changes to be made. This may also suggest that leaders will discriminate within a single feedback message between the parts they can accept and those they cannot. These points were corroborated in the interviews, particularly in incidents of 360º/ multi-rater feedback, where different elements were accepted or rejected depending on the recipient's evaluation.

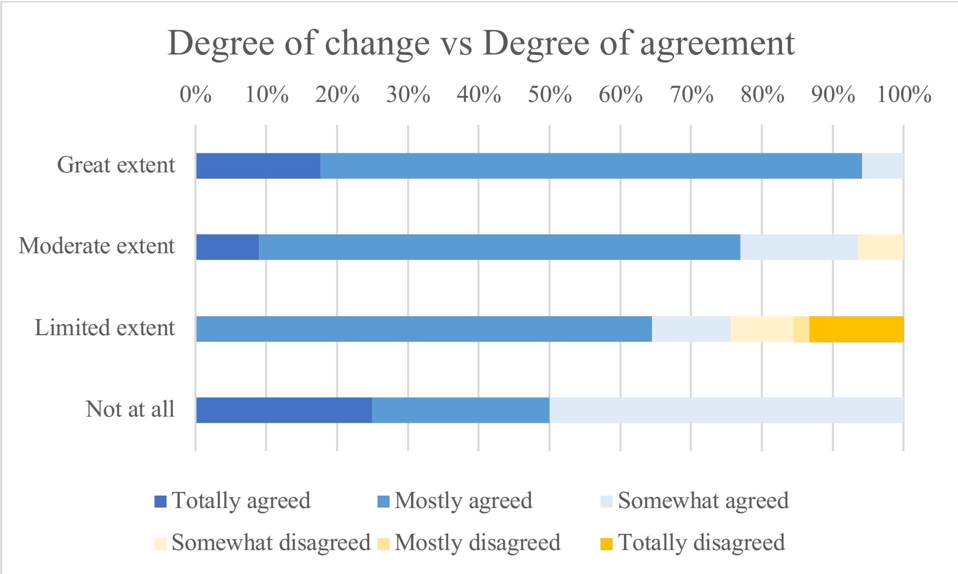

Figure 4-11: Comparison of the extent of change with the degree of agreement

- *Degree of surprise* –Figure 4-12 below shows little difference in the extent of change according to the degree of surprise experienced. This may suggest that initial surprise is not a factor in determining the perceived magnitude of ultimate changes. However, interview participants reported that prior familiarity with feedback had an accumulating effect, lending additional credibility to the message and therefore, to the likelihood of acceptance and subsequent change.

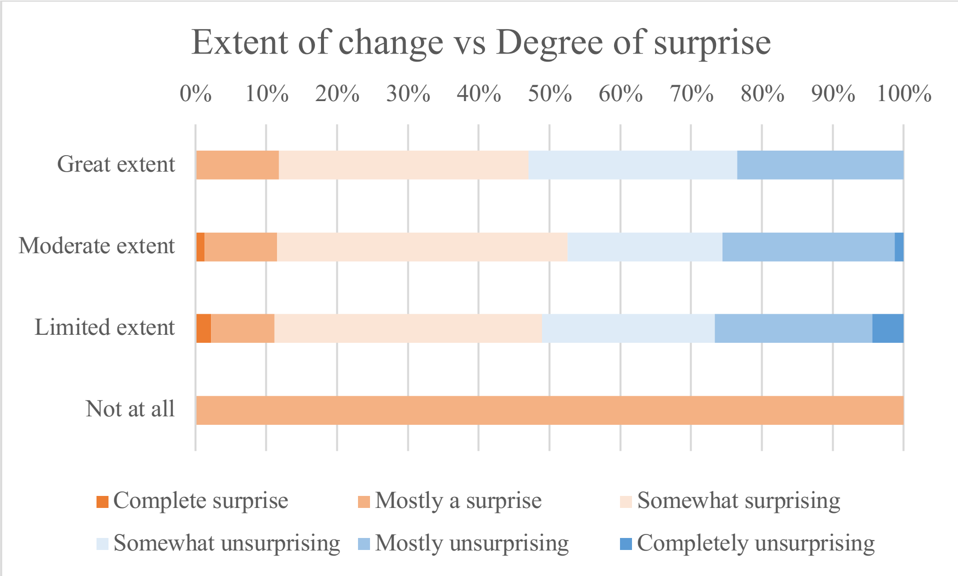

Figure 4-12: Comparison of the extent of change with the degree of surprise.

- *Desire to change* –Figure 4-13 below suggests a clear link between a strong desire to change and actual materialisation. This data would suggest that knowledge of feedback is in itself not necessarily enough to create personal change, but that a clear motivation to make a change must accompany it. This might suggest a role for feedback providers beyond delivery and clarification of a feedback message, into the exploration of recipient's sense-making of feedback and motives (or lack of) for making changes.

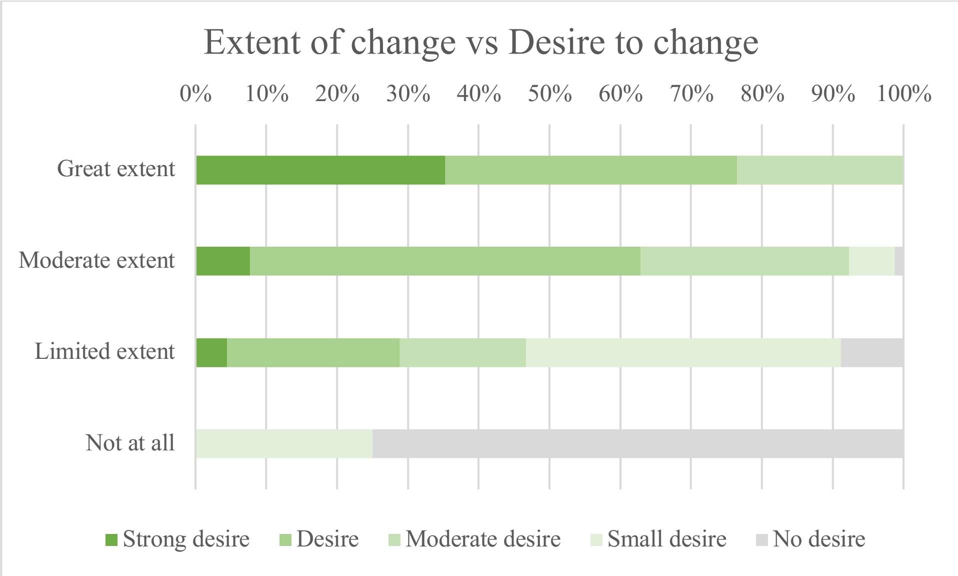

Figure 4-13: Comparison of the extent of change with the desire to change.

In summary, the questionnaire data suggested that those that made changes to ‘a great extent’ as a result of receiving feedback appeared more likely to have i) sought that feedback out, ii) perceived a critical element within it, iii) agreed with the feedback assessment overall and iv) had a stronger motivation to make changes as a result of it. While this makes intuitive sense, it is also clear that determinants of feedback response are far from linear, and many other factors are at play in specific instances. Exploration of these factors was therefore included as part of the interview question protocol.

4.3.2 Interpretation of Interview data

The findings presented in section 4.2 suggest some general patterns in i) how recipient leaders experience feedback, ii) in their attitudes towards feedback, and ii) the reasons gave for their responses to feedback. This section further discusses these three areas, offering initial conceptualisations of the data.

Recipient experiences of feedback

Five major categories of (overlapping) responses to feedback emerged from the data, depicted conceptually in Figure 4-14 below. Each of these types of feedback experience was associated with difference valence types (negative vs positive feedback), different levels of prior familiarity (unaware vs aware) with the central feedback message, and different levels of resulting discomfort or dissonance (low vs high).

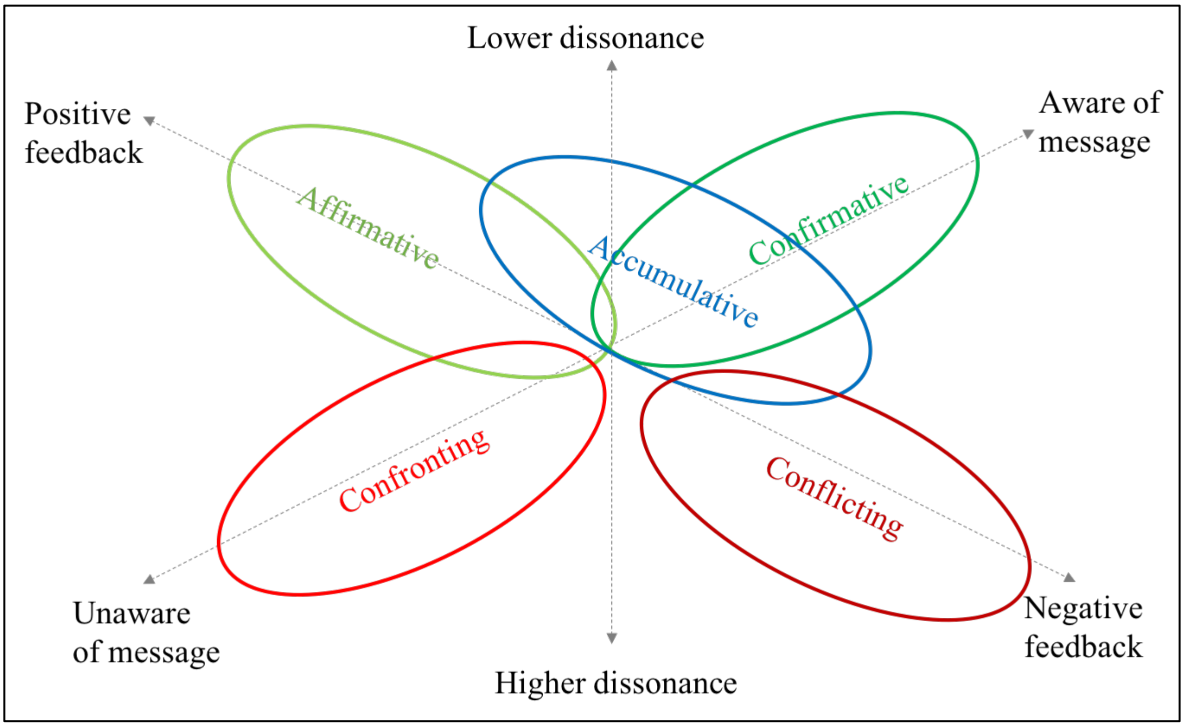

Figure 4-14: Conceptualisation of feedback experience

Thus, for example, feedback experienced as ‘conflicting’ was associated with negative valence and higher levels of dissonance but not necessarily with prior awareness. Table 4-18 below shows the various combination of these factors with each type of identified feedback experience.

Table 4-18: Type of feedback experience by valence, prior awareness and level of dissonance

Type of feedback experience	Valence	Prior awareness	Typical level of dissonance
Affirmative	Positive	Aware or unaware	Lower
Confirmative	Positive or Negative	Aware	Lower
Conflicting	Negative	Aware or unaware	Higher
Confronting	Positive or Negative	Unaware	Higher
Accumulative	Positive or Negative	Aware	Low-Medium

When the incidents and their outcomes were mapped against this framework, it became apparent that feedback was most likely to be rejected under two general types of conditions, as depicted in Figure 4-15 below. Firstly, change appeared less likely when the level of dissonance created was low, i.e. the feedback created no sense of discomfort or discrepancy. This was most likely to be true when the feedback was purely positive and familiar, for example, when a leader received a compliment or repeated praise. Secondly, feedback rejection appeared associated with higher levels of dissonance, e.g. when the feedback was experienced as some form of threat, or as discrepant with the self-image. This latter finding accords with the work of self-discrepancy theorists (Higgins, 1987; Higgins et al., 1994;

Higgins et al., 1990), who found that discrepant feedback was associated with negative affect, e.g. irritation, guilt, embarrassment or shame.

This interpretation would therefore suggest that feedback response was, in part, determined by the level of dissonance experienced by the recipient, and that change was most likely when the level of dissonance was perceived as relatively tolerable. However, it might also be hypothesised that the perception of 'dissonance' is highly individualised and subjective.

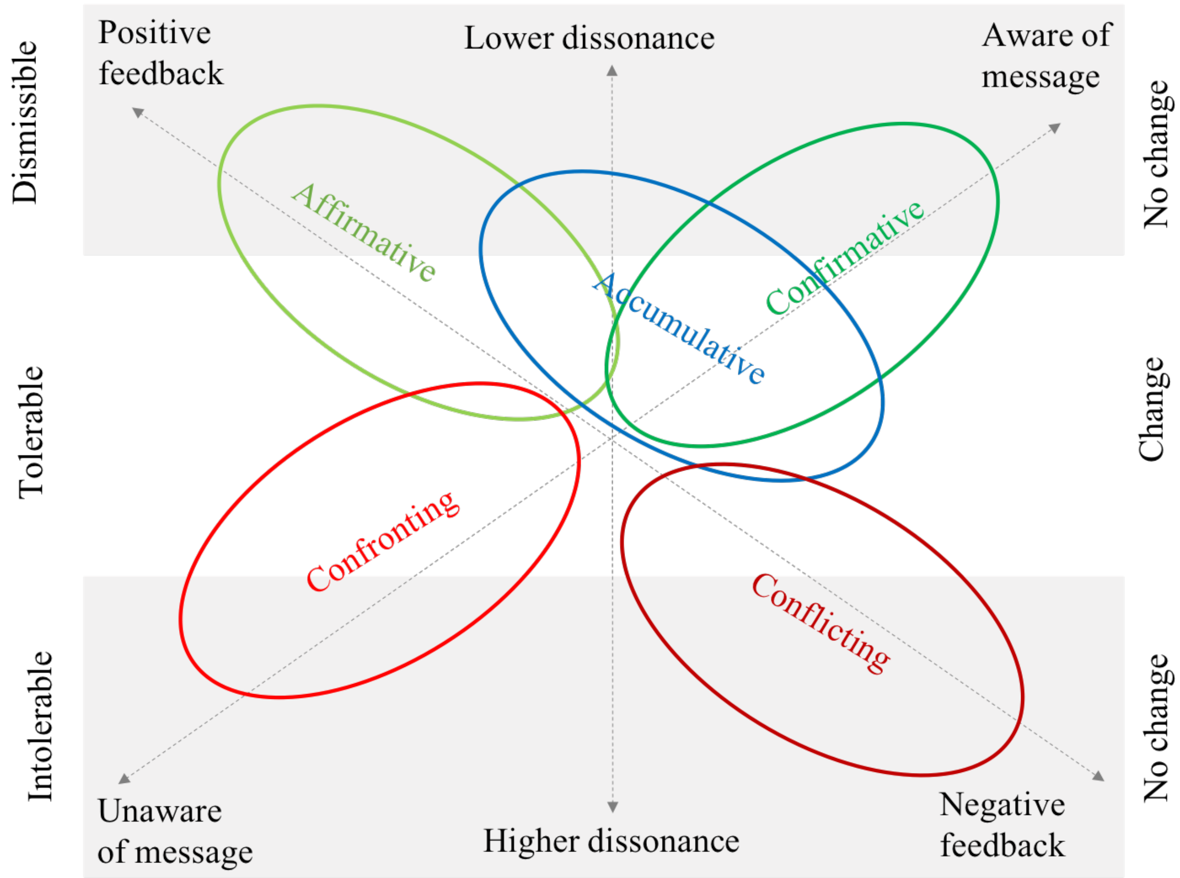

Figure 4-15: Conceptualisation of feedback experience in relation to resulting change

Within this change 'zone' the most powerful and sustained changes were recounted by L1, L3 and L8. These were all examples of affirmative and confronting feedback which appeared to result in a wholesale shift in confidence levels and sustained changes in consequent behaviours. These were all incidents where a trusted colleague forcefully impressed upon the recipients their respect for their abilities, demanding they accept this as a fact. This feedback appeared to nullify or counteract previously imbibed negative self-beliefs, creating a level of tolerable 'positive dissonance' in the recipient which they could not dismiss as irrelevant. In contrast, where tolerable 'negative dissonance' was generated, this seemed more likely to be associated with fault correction, compliance, coercion or reluctance.

This model suggests that feedback rejection is, in part, determined by the degree of dissonance experienced by the recipient and that some degree of dissonance is necessary if a change is to result. However, where dissonance is too high, this may be experienced as intolerable and therefore resisted or rejected. Equally, where the level of dissonance is too low, feedback may be seen as irrelevant, unimportant and therefore dismissible. Feedback providers may, therefore, have an essential role in ensuring that feedback is delivered in a way that provokes tolerable dissonance and supports the recipient to explore perceived challenges. This facet of feedback exchange is explored further in later chapters.

Recipient attitudes to feedback, learning and development

While participants gave a range of reasons for their responses, this did not appear to provide a complete explanation of the complexity and apparent contradictory nature of their actual responses. While some of the complexity can be explained in part by the model of dissonance presented above, differences in response also suggest differing individual 'permeability' to feedback. Figure 4-16 below, presents a conceptualisation of this, showing how permeability (indicated by line thickness) might vary between two individuals. It also suggests that changes can be thought of occurring at different 'depths', firstly at an outer behavioural level (outer circle) and secondly, at a deeper level where the self-image is potentially implicated. Individuals can be conceived of as sitting on a continuum between low and high 'permeability' and as responding to feedback at different levels, with more significant dissonance (positive or negative) associated with feedback that implicates the inner self. This conceptualisation is consistent with feedback theorists who distinguish between feedback at a task level and a personal level (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000; Kluger and DeNisi, 1996), and those that suggest stronger affective reactions associated when feedback implicates the self-image (Higgins, 1987)

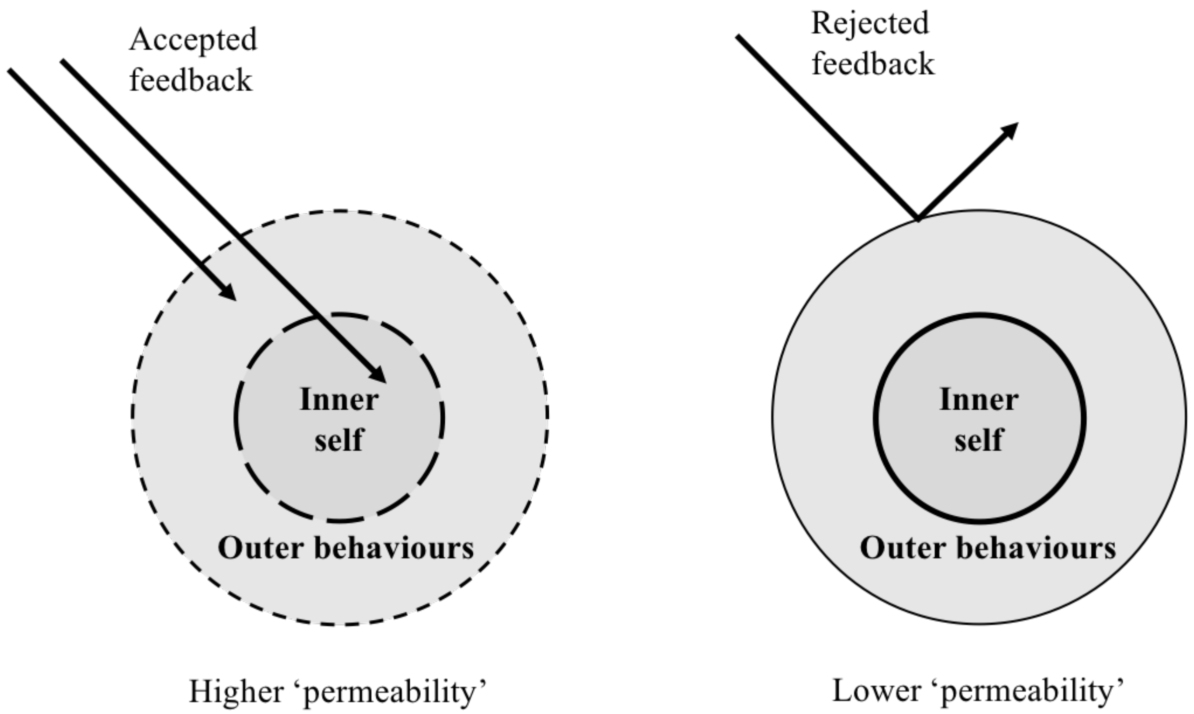

Figure 4-16: Conceptualisation of recipient permeability to feedback

Support for this conceptualisation can be found in both how participants described their experiences of feedback and how they responded to it. While the 'self-doubter' group appear to be more permeable to external feedback, they also appeared available to change at both a practical behavioural and at a radical personal level. They also displayed a propensity for critical feedback and would reject feedback they construed as lacking a negative element. These processes are depicted below in Figure 4-17.

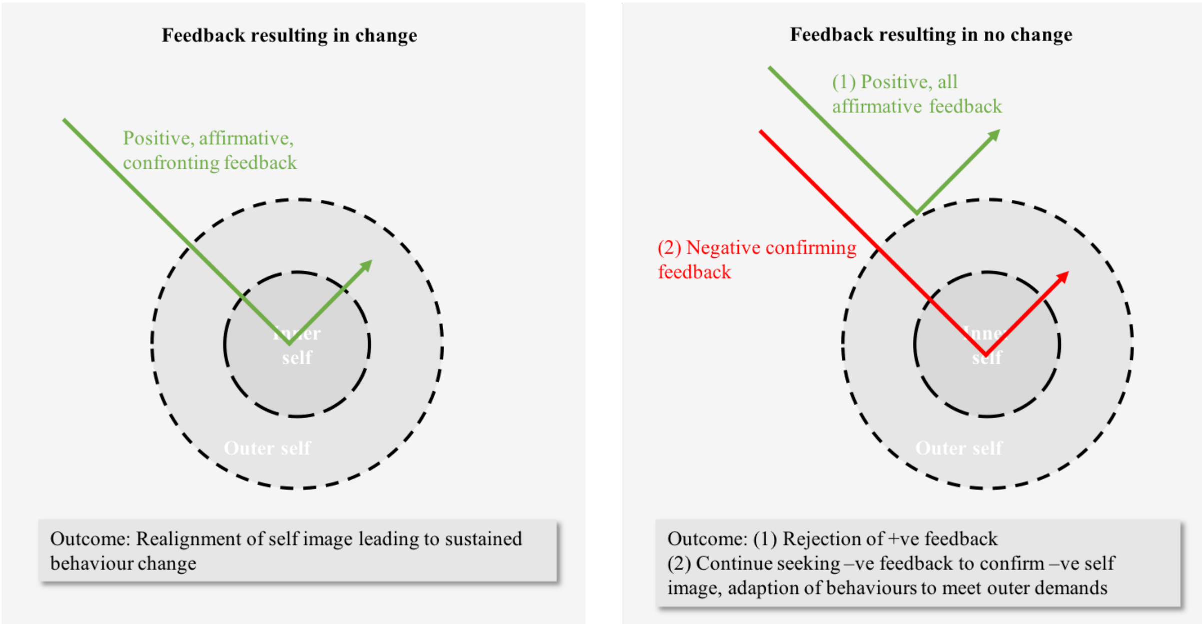

Figure 4-17: Responses to feedback - self doubters

Conversely, reactions in the ‘self-certain’ group seemed more associated with sensitivity to negative feedback, greater impermeability to feedback in general and a greater ability to protect their core ‘inner’ image. This is depicted below in Figure 4-18.

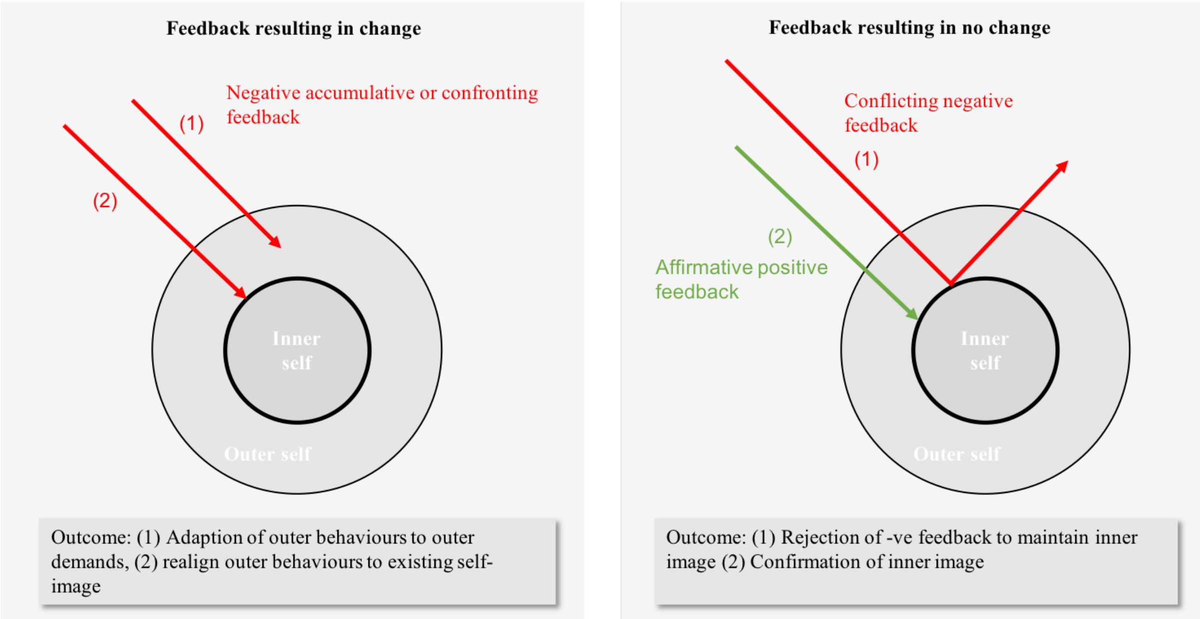

Figure 4-18: Responses to feedback - self-certain

The rest of the participants (termed the 'pragmatists') sat somewhere between these extremes, apparently able to let in both positive and negative feedback, and make behavioural adaptations in their outer world whilst protecting their core inner image (see Figure 4-19 below)

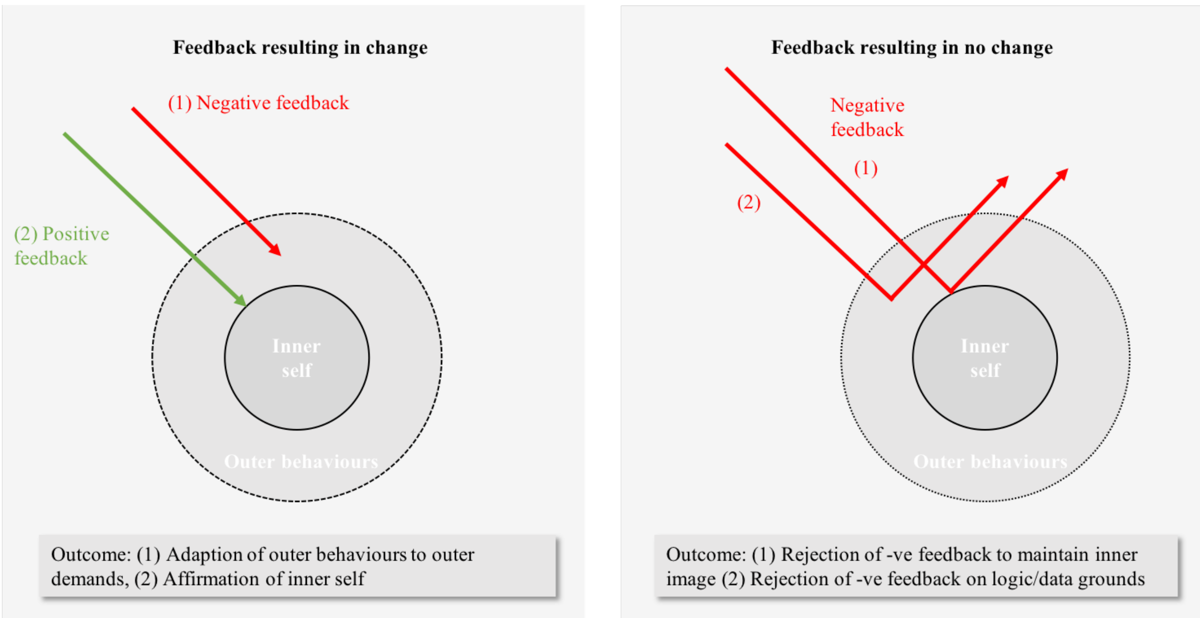

Figure 4-19: Responses to feedback – pragmatists

The data also suggests an asymmetric process for protecting the self-image. The 'self-certain' appeared to reject negative feedback when it was perceived to threaten the existing self-image, thus maintaining that self-image and sense of self-confidence. Conversely, the self-doubters appeared to protect their (overly negative) self-image by rebuffing positive feedback and overly pursuing negative feedback, thus maintaining their sense of low self-confidence. However, in circumstances where positive feedback could not be ignored or deflected (e.g. by positive confronting/ conflicting feedback from a trusted colleague), this self-reinforcing process appeared to be disrupted. There was, therefore, evidence of the self-doubters becoming somewhat more self-certain, and consequently potentially less open to feedback.

The 'pragmatist' group again showed aspects of the self-doubters and self-certain groups. In particular, they appeared to weigh the value of feedback, noting inconsistencies detected in the logic or evidence whilst remaining open to improvement. They, therefore, appeared to have a more discriminatory process for evaluating feedback than either the self-doubters or the self-certain participants, which did not implicate the self-image.

Recipient reasons for their responses to feedback

Section 4.2.4 above detailed how participants explained the reasons for feedback acceptance or rejection. Table 4-19 below consolidates this material, using the following headings:

- Input factors – reasons given relating to the credibility of the data or its source.
- Relational factors – reasons given relating to the nature of the relationship between provider and recipient, particularly the level of trust.
- Process factors – reasons given relating to how feedback was given, in particular, what was considered as constructive delivery and how feedback was contracted for

- Recipient factors –characteristics of the recipient, in particular their receptivity to feedback.
- Provider factors – reasons given that related to provider characteristics or attitudes
- Contextual factors – reasons given that related to the broader organisational context in which the feedback incident occurred, particularly the organisational norms and expectations as well as specific practices

Table 4-19: The reasons given for feedback acceptance/rejection – Leader participants

	Input factors	Relational factors	Process factors	Recipient factors	Provider factors	Contextual factors
Leader recipients	**Credible data** – From a trusted source, of known provenance Unbiased Logical, evidenced, tangible, consistent with other feedback, Relevant to the personal context *Continuous vs discrete* *Spontaneous vs planned*	**Trusting relationship** High trust relationship (established over time) Providing psychological safety Personal volition in receiving feedback	**Constructive delivery** – Personalised to the recipient Caringly delivered - sensitive to the recipient Well-timed. Avoids damaging the recipient or relationship Points to practical change/action *Honesty vs considerate*	**Recipient evaluation of (specific) feedback** Consistency with self-beliefs/ self-image/ values/ beliefs Strength of affective reaction **Recipient general attitude to feedback** permeability to feedback, attitude to learning and change, self-doubting vs self-certainty	**Attitude to feedback provider -** Seen as a **t**rusted source – unbiased, no agenda, assumed positive/ developmental intent, having genuine care for the recipient.	**Perception of feedback culture** – (Poor) prior experiences of the performance management process Perceptions of feedback-seeking Critical/deficit focus.

[Key: *Text in italics represents disputed perspectives]*

Most important to the leaders in the interviews was the presence of a trusting relationship, where the developmental/ positive intent of the provider was not in doubt. This factor appeared coupled with a need for a sense of psychological safety where the feedback could be both shared and explored without a sense of shame or exposure (i.e. intolerable dissonance). Providers, therefore, needed to be seen as a trusted source of information, unbiased, and with no personal agenda other than development of the leader.

The leaders also wanted feedback data to be credible, which was variously defined as logical, well-evidenced, unbiased, consistent and tangible, particularly when provided by a less trusted source. The leader participants wanted constructive delivery of feedback, meaning it was considerately and sensitively given, well-timed, and personalised to their situation. They also wanted feedback to point to improvement areas and to be supported in moving into action. This latter point potentially accords with a finding from the questionnaire responses, which suggests many leaders hold a deficit model of change, i.e. a belief that improvements come from fixing weaknesses and problems alone.

However, as discussed above, there were also tensions and inconsistencies within accounts. These often centred around this issue of full honesty, with participants both desiring it as an ideal, but apparently dreading information they found too critical or overwhelming. Similarly, advocates of spontaneous feedback appeared to see this as more authentic (and therefore credible) feedback, while those who wished for more regular feedback cited a perceived paucity of developmental or affirmative feedback in their workplace.

This consolidation of findings suggests that many conditions combine to produce the feedback outcome, including the recipient’s general attitudes towards feedback, their evaluation of a specific feedback message and emotional reaction to it, their relationship with and attitudes towards the provider, as well as the manner of delivery. Lastly, it is worth noting that the broader organisational context appeared to have a bearing, shaping the extent to which the leaders felt they should seek out and act on any feedback received. Feedback response can therefore be seen as highly individualised, relational and contextualised.

These themes will be further explored and compared with findings from the feedback providers (HR professionals and coaches), presented in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively.

Chapter 5: Findings – HR participants

This section presents a summary of the analysis of HR participant interview transcripts, resulting from the methods described in section 3.2.3 above. In order to facilitate comparisons with the leader and coach participant groups, findings are presented using the following headings:

- Context to data – an overview of the six HR interview participants and the feedback incidents they recounted (Section 5.1)
- Provider experiences of giving feedback– the reported phenomenological experience of the HR participants in response to giving (developmental) feedback to a leader. (Section 5.2)
- Provider actions– an overview of reported ways of working, including methods used to deliver feedback (Section 5.3).
- Provider sense-making – how the HR professionals/ internal coaches explained responses to their feedback and the conditions they felt led recipients to accept or reject it. Differences in attitudes towards feedback provision are also noted (Section 5.4)

Typical quotes from interview transcripts are used throughout to illustrate themes and discussion points. The chapter concludes with an interpretation of results (Section 5.5), drawing initial comparisons with the findings outlined in Chapter 4.

5.1 Context to HR data

5.1.1 Overview of HR interview participants

The HR interview participants (Appendix 12) consisted of six HR professionals, working at a senior level in the study organisation, e.g. Head of Regional HR, Director of Talent and Development, SVP HR. All had considerable experience of giving feedback to leaders in the study organisation, including at the level of the leader participants interviewed. Demographically, they were all female bar one (the most senior) and had worked in the organisation for at least five years. Geographically, the HR group was somewhat less diverse than the leader participants, with four participants based in the UK and two from Germany. Within the group there were three HR 'generalists' (coded as HR1, HR3, HR5) who provided a broad spectrum of functional services within their business, reporting to the business head of that area. The remainder worked as 'development specialists' (coded as HR2, HR4, HR6) focussing primarily on people development, including leadership development, outside of a direct line relationship with the recipient. None had specific training in giving feedback to leaders and had learnt their skills either through training in psychometric debriefing, coach skills training or through work experience.

The HR generalist group had a variety of line relationships with their respective feedback recipients including as a subordinate, peer and line manager. Feedback was mostly based on their direct day-day observation and interaction with recipients; however, many also acted as a feedback 'conduit' for others in the same business area. Compared to the specialist group, the HR generalist group appeared to have closer but more complicated, relationships with their feedback recipients, particularly when the feedback recipient was also their line manager. They had usually worked alongside the recipient for some years, and developmental conversations with them were seen as an integral and continuous part of their role. The participants mainly reported instigating developmental feedback conversations with leaders; however, there were also a few examples of recipients seeking out feedback from them after important meetings or events.

By contrast, the development specialists had 'out-of-line' relationships with recipients and were less likely to know the recipient in advance, i.e. were relative strangers. Their relationship, therefore, appeared to be somewhat more straightforward and more tightly bounded than the generalists. Feedback-giving to recipient leaders was usually within the context of a development event, for example, providing 360º/ multi-rater feedback before a training programme or observational feedback at a development centre. However, there were also examples of 'difficult' recipients being referred to the specialists for a feedback 'intervention' and remediation. In these circumstances, it was not uncommon for some degree of discussion about the recipient to have occurred prior to the actual feedback conversation, for example, with a line manager or other HR professional.

5.1.2 Overview of feedback incidents

In total, 17 incidents were recounted by the 6 HR participants, of which ten were described as resulting in some form of change, with seven incidents resulting in no change (see Table 5-1 below). Of the incidents resulting in change, just over half involved some form of delay, i.e. the provider reported recipient reflection or resistance before eventual acceptance.

Table 5-1: HR incidents by feedback source and the resultant outcome.

	Outcome (No. incidents)			**Total No incidents**
	Rapid acceptance	Delayed acceptance	No change	
Personal observation in workplace	2	3	3	8
360º/ multi-rater feedback debrief	2	2	3	7
Psychometric debrief			1	1
Development centre observation and debrief		1		1
Totals	4	6	7	17

As noted above, the HR generalists primarily reported giving feedback based on personal observations in the workplace (8 incidents). In contrast, the HR specialists reported giving feedback on 360º/ multi-rater assessments, psychometrics and personal observations of recipients attending development centre assessments. Appendix 7 gives a more detailed summary of each incident.

Table 5-2 below illustrates the various sources of feedback deployed by the HR participants, giving a typical context and illustrative quote.

Table 5-2: Illustrative examples of feedback types deployed by HR participants

Type of Feedback	Typical context	Example quote
Personal observation in the workplace	HR professional playing back own observations of the recipient	*"But I felt kind of duty bound to and I dealt with it straightaway, at the end of the meeting, that's when I said to him, "Have you got some time later today? I'd really like to give you, if you're happy to have some feedback on your presentation?", I felt there was no point leaving it a week and then coming back to it because it wouldn't be fresh in his mind either" HR3-1.*
360/ multi-rater feedback – debrief of report	HR professional debriefing 360º/ multi-rater feedback report and discussing implications and possible area to address.	*"The one I can remember is giving 360 feedback I was delivering and the person, unfortunately it was not a face-to-face session I had with that person, but he was just on the phone and he found 500 reasons or even more, why what was in there was probably not correct or not valuable" HR6-2*
Psychometric instrument – debrief of reports	HR professional debriefing psychometric instrument and discussing implications for recipient and recipient's relationships	*"So someone's for example an ENTJ, and they're getting feedback of having a very driving style and very pace-setting style, we can talk about 'That's not a fault, that's how you're made up and, there's nothing wrong, but it can get very tiring and wearing and maybe lands as a bit bossy' " HR4.*
Development centre observations and debrief	HR professional debriefing observations of a recipient's performance and behaviours during a development centre exercise.	*"When I was explaining the observed activities during our development programme, when you give feedback there, everybody knows that they're observed because the observers are standing around them and taking notes, so it's not a big surprise" HR2*

In contrast to the leader interviews, in all 17 incidents, the central feedback message related to some element of negative or critical feedback. Indeed, several of the incidents related to situations where a leader's (negative) reputation preceded them, and participants were repeating and reinforcing feedback that others had already given. There were no incidents that highlighted purely affirmative feedback as an instigator of change as in the leader interviews.

In terms of the central feedback message, there were two dominant types of incidents. Firstly, and most prevalent, were incidents where the leader's poor behaviour was seen as detrimentally impacting others/ their team, with potential wider adverse effects on the business they lead. Thus, for example, HR1 described giving spontaneous, unplanned feedback to his line manager after witnessing, what he described as, bullying behaviours towards another colleague:

> *"But part of his success factor was, his strong suit was, being aggressive with people, it was managing by fear. And I don't know, something inside me I just said, 'You're going to kill that guy,' I remember it like it was yesterday. I said, 'You're going to kill that guy, I said you've got to lay off him now. Give the guy a break, give him a chance'. And his response was, 'He's failed again this week' ."* HR1-2, generalist describing giving feedback on poor behaviours.

The second type of message related to ineffective personal behaviours which were primarily detrimental to the leader concerned, rather than negatively impacting those around them. So, for example, HR3 described giving feedback to a leader on a verbal 'tic' which they unaware of, and which they were then successfully able to eliminate:

> *"So, one of the feedbacks to one of the senior people that I interact with, was that when he's ever presenting, he'd end every sentence with 'Yeah?', so he'd say, 'And then that will happen, and then we'll do this and so and so, yeah?', and every single sentence would end in the word 'Yeah?'. If you were someone observing in the room or trying to absorb the message he was getting across in the presentation, what you focused on was the 'yeah', and therefore his message and what he was trying to deliver was getting lost in translation because you found yourself counting how many times he said 'Yes' ".* HR3-1, generalist giving feedback on detrimental behaviours

While 'one-off' feedback was more typical in the specialist accounts, the generalists reported incidents which were part of a series of conversations and related to more enduring behaviours in the leader:

> *"His main development issue was how he performance managed people in formal business reviews, and also on a one-to-one basis. He could be too hard, too cutting, too aggressive, too intense. I have worked very hard with X in the last 12 months… he used to cause a lot of fear for the people that were on the receiving end of these reviews. So, there would be an operations review, or a programme review either on one site or in one division. So, they had a bit of a reputation of being... People did not look forward to them. So, the feedback I gave X, quite directly, was the negative impact that he was having during these reviews, and … to try and change that."*
> HR1-1, generalist describing giving feedback on enduring problematic behaviours.

The HR specialists, as well as giving feedback as part of planned interventions, described instances where a leader was referred to them by the HR generalist community. These were typically where a leader had failed to respond to line management and line HR feedback. For example, one of the developmental specialists (HR2) recalled being asked to deploy a 360º/ multi-rater assessment as a means of changing long-standing, problematic behaviour:

> *"But I also have another experience, this was also in a 360, this was a person who is on a very high level within our leadership and we invited this person to attend the 360 because we knew that this person behaves really bad to other people. So, we thought if we give him this feedback from different directions, that people are not so happy about his behaviour, then maybe this would be something like an eye-opener for this person."* HR2-2, specialist giving 360º/ multi-rater feedback at the request of generalist

In addition, one HR generalist recalled escalating to an external coach where it was felt the issues required specialist input beyond their capability or that available in the organisation:

> *"And I then referred him to somebody that I knew who had a good, almost like a psychological background and stuff, and specialised in dealing with extreme management leadership type behaviours, particularly that type of aggression thing… And he went and he worked with this individual, and it did help things. I think there was some deep stuff with him, and I'm not qualified to go into areas about childhood and what happened to people in their childhood. I think he'd had quite a tough upbringing... I think he was probably mistreated as a child, and it was that type of stuff."* HR1-2, generalist describing referring a leader to external coach.

5.2 HR provider experiences of giving feedback

This section summarises the participant's reported lived experience of giving feedback to a leader in the study organisation, including their reported motivations to give feedback, their perceived sources of 'legitimisation', as well as their 'in the moment' experiences.

5.2.1 Being motivated to give feedback

All the HR participants reported feeling personally motivated to contribute to others development, and saw feedback provision as very important for individual and leadership growth:

> *"I think it's just crucial for the development of people generally, both leaders and non-leaders. I think if I don't feedback about how I'm perceived or how other people see myself or what I think about what I do, I just think I'm wonderful and move on, I'll continuing to do the same stupid things I did previously*." HR3 describing personal motivations to give feedback

> *"I want him to be successful, I know that he can be successful and there will be other things like that small bit of feedback, that I will work with him on now he's been appointed to this new role because that's going to bring new challenges with it as well. I just want people to be the best person they can be.* HR5 describing personal motivations to give feedback

They also saw leaders as in particular need of feedback citing their disproportionate influence and impact on others in the organisation, as well as their impact on organisational performance and culture. They felt that leaders could be ‘insulated’ from candid feedback due to their position and seniority and the difficulties subordinates might have in giving critical feedback to their line managers.

> *“I do think that they should be leading the way so I think they should be more open to feedback than other people because they’re leaders and they should be the ones being able to give good feedback to their people because it has an impact on the culture they create. So, if they’re open to getting feedback from their direct reports, for example, I think that’s a very, very powerful tool to create a culture where you are allowed to give feedback, and I think that just improves things.”* HR3 describing the impact of leadership feedback on organisational culture.

These motivations, coupled with their own espoused positive intent, helped many to overcome the perceived difficulties of giving (negative) feedback (see below), and frame feedback-giving as beneficial to the recipients concerned:

> *“That it’s a very, leadership is a very lonely place, and you need people around you that are going to tell you the truth, that are going to give you feedback. Because without that, you're never going to be as successful as you can be and once you get that into your mind, that people give you feedback in the interests of you being successful , it’s a very different place to be”* HR4 explaining their intent behind giving feedback.

However, it was also clear that participants gave feedback for reasons other than the recipient’s development. A motivation to give feedback that was frequently cited was a desire to minimise or prevent their damaging impact upon others, or to avoid harm to organisational performance:

> *"So, there's one particular individual that he had it in for if I can describe it like that. And I became acutely aware that it was having a major effect on the health, on the wellbeing of the person that was on the receiving end of it."* HR1 describing the detrimental effect of a leader's behaviour on one of their subordinates.

It was noticeable in some incidents that the 'client' was primarily the organisation rather than the individual concerned, and the intent was remedial rather than developmental. It is also worth stating that in two incidents, the motivation was neither. H3 recounted venting angrily to her line manager because of his poor perceived behaviours and HR1 described giving professional HR advice to his line manager. It could be argued that these were not examples of feedback per se, so much as giving a personal opinion and advice-giving, respectively. These incidents perhaps illustrate the blurred understanding of a concept such as 'feedback' in organisational life.

5.2.2 Feeling legitimised to give feedback

All the participants felt that their organisational role legitimised feedback provision from their positions as a 'developer' or as a 'coach' to line management. Many expressed the purpose of giving feedback as a 'raising self-awareness', which was variously defined as helping another to understand their strengths and limitations or impact on others. However, it appeared that many participants felt leaders were not self-aware in the main, and therefore in need of their feedback:

"So, we had conversation about it, he was completely unaware that he did it, completely unaware that he did it and subsequently, so the good news story is that he was really grateful for the feedback" HR3 describing lack of awareness in feedback recipient.

Comparing the generalists with the specialists, the HR generalists appeared to see themselves as authorised to give feedback from their positions as trusted advisors and confidantes to leadership. From this position, they seemed enabled to 'speaking truth to power, even if it still felt somewhat uncomfortable:

"So, I just feel that it's the importance and the difference it can make in the organisation, that people are often scared to do it because they fear it may rebound on them and their career and everything else. I just always believe in, you've got to be brave, particularly in the role that I'm in. It's up to me to be brave about that." HR1, describing the importance of giving 'upward' feedback to leaders.

This privileged position appeared to give some generalists a sense of perceived power and influence in the organisation, seeing themselves as intermediaries for the views and observations of others as well as their own. This 'go-between' position between the organisation and the leader was not however without its tensions, and some generalists discussed the difficulties of remaining objective and the care required in relaying (critical) feedback on behalf of others without their own direct experience of events.

"You know I'm selective in terms of… I've got to have a consistent and valid view of something before I'll bring it to him. If it was about someone else and there's an issue

> *like that going on just now, that I've gone and validated this view that was given to me about someone and about their behaviour. I've gone and validated that now to an extent."* L1 describing to need to validate third party feedback before relaying.

A few also reported navigating confidentiality as a problem, and some providers appeared to find themselves caught between competing needs and agendas. For example, HR1 was asked by a Group Executive to evaluate his line-manager, and described the subsequent awkwardness created by this feedback 'triangle':

> *"But sometimes when you get into triangles, you've got to be very careful, because it can end up backfiring on you. So that's the other thing I would say in this whole feedback loop. When there's another party involved upward when your boss's boss is involved, my god you've got to be careful."* L1 describing being asked to take part in a feedback 'triangle'.

Figure 5-1 below summaries the multiple roles, relationships and purposes reported by the HR generalists.

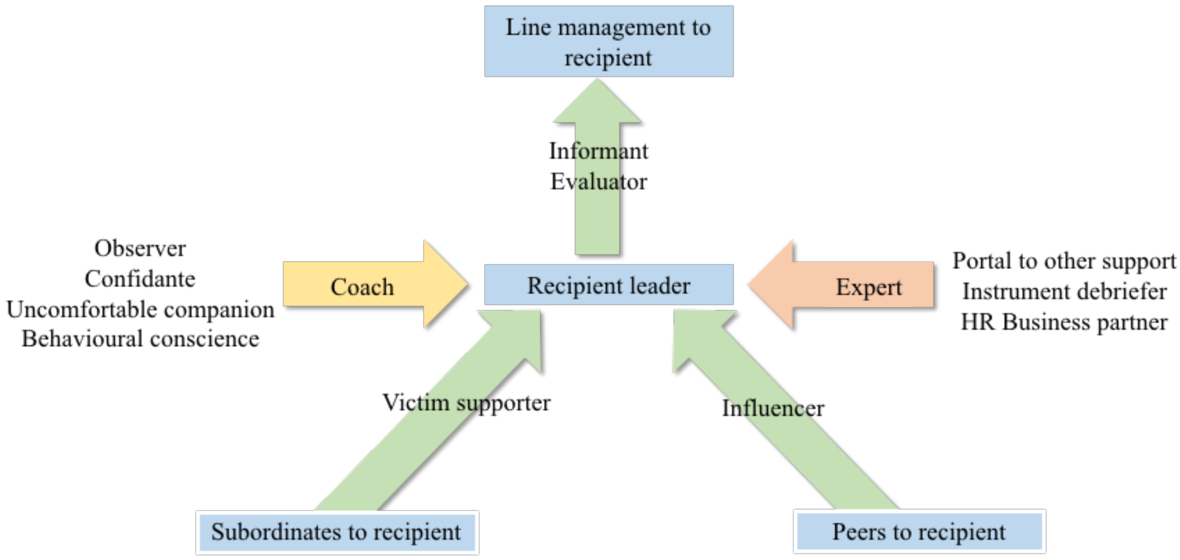

Figure 5-1: HR Generalist feedback roles and purposes

In contrast to the generalists, the specialist group reported their perceived legitimacy as arising from their training in some form of feedback instrument (such as a 360º/ multi-rater assessment or psychometric), or their experience in giving observational feedback during assessment events. They tended to stress their neutrality and objectivity to a greater extent than the generalists, seeing this as validating their position as feedback provider.

> *"And being removed. I think that's the most important one, is that I'm removed from their daily situation so whatever they say to me isn't going to impact how they're seen by their division or how they're seen by the people making the decisions about their career, I'm a neutral party, so I think that's the No. 1, is having a neutral party, a voice on the end of the phone"* HR4 describing her detached, neutral position.

However, there were multiple incidents where the feedback provider had been given ‘pre-wiring’ by line management or HR generalists, particularly when the recipient was seen as problematic.

Figure 5-2 below summarises the feedback roles and purposes described by the HR specialists.

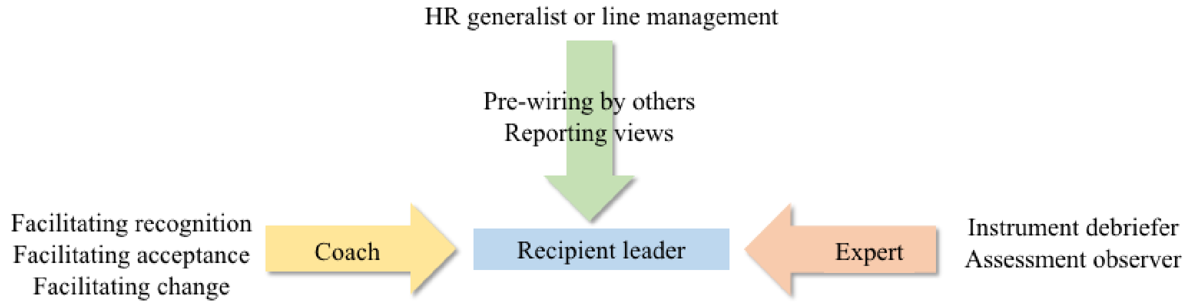

Figure 5-2: HR specialist feedback roles and purposes – HR specialists

5.2.3 Felt experience of providing feedback

When recalling giving feedback, participants reported meeting a range of reactions in the recipients including surprise, resistance or even outright rejection.

> *“I could see on his face, the facial expressions were really strong, he was really shocked. He said, ‘I wasn’t aware about this, that people see me like this, my own people who are really important to me, maybe they don’t feel that I feel like this’ .”*
>
> HR2-1, HR2 describing shock reaction to feedback

"And he found 500 reasons or even more, why what was in there was probably not correct or not valuable, why he could still continue doing what he did up to now, why it is not correct, why this might just be that specific person's view and things like that, so it didn't land at all …, he was just saying, 'Well that's not true, this is not the case and I can prove why' and he told me stories about when it didn't happen or when he behaved differently so yes, it didn't land at all." HR6-2, HR specialist describing the rejection of feedback

In the main, the HR participants reported feeling some level of apprehension and personal discomfort when giving feedback. Some participants talked about a tendency to want to avoid giving 'difficult' feedback and the courage it took to do so on the occasions where difficulties were anticipated. Participants described predicting likely negative recipient reactions and were pleasantly surprised if this was not borne out in reality.

"I think there's this tendency not to provide feedback when it's a bit difficult and a bit awkward, I think we … and I know I've definitely done this in the past, I've shied away of giving difficult feedback, having that courageous conversation, I think it's human nature not to want to do it and so we … I think feedback is really important and yet we just, either we don't have the skills for it, or we don't give it the time it really deserves." HR5 noting their tendency to avoid giving difficult feedback.

"In the first moment, when I was preparing for this, I was thinking maybe this will be difficult. What will happen if this person says 'No, that's not true, they just want to say I'm a bad leader' or something like this, so I was a little bit concerned but then finally, when we had the feedback discussion, I noticed that he was very open to this

and he didn't react like I was expecting, so it was very positive, a very positive experience." HR2 describing their negative apprehension before a feedback session

In general, and unsurprisingly, participants found it much easier to deliver positive feedback rather than negative. In particular, participants found dealing with disagreement and resistance to feedback frustratingly difficult to work with, provoking anxiety, irritation and even anger in them in some cases.

"I wanted to slap him, he was horrible, because he wanted to be the one, without allowing other people to come in, , so I was really incredibly frustrated by observing him, so I was yes, frustrated." HR6 describing her frustrations about an assessment centre participant.

It also triggered, in some, considerable mystification as to why recipients could not accept the feedback, especially in the face of apparently objective evidence:

"So interestingly, his 360 was not horrible at all, so it was a normal 360 with some strengths and some weaknesses, yes, fine and I didn't understand why he was doing that and I was just delivering the feedback, so I hadn't been part of the people giving him the 360 so I was not one of the raters and I didn't have any particular interest and it was very clear that it's strictly confidential ...so I did not really see why he was doing that, he didn't need to prove to me that he was good. If it was an assessment centre, yes I could understand but it wasn't any of that, it was pure development and it was confidential so what's the problem? I couldn't get it. I have no idea; it is

something beyond." HR 6-2, HR specialist trying to understand reasons for feedback rejection

A sense of 'hitting a brick' wall was therefore apparent in many of the accounts, coupled with an apparent sense of personal inadequacy in being unable to deal with the situation productively:

> *"Well, I was rolling my eyes when he came up with another story about what he did and what he achieved, and I was thinking that what else could I do? I was quite desperate and thinking about alternative ways to talk to him, to find a way to, I think my major goal was just making him understand what other people were saying, so that was part of the feedback he got, and I think I didn't succeed in that. Probably it would have been done in a different way, but I couldn't think of how I could do that.*" HR6 describing their response to hitting defensiveness.

However, where a way forward could be found, the participants reported a sense of delight and personal achievement at having circumnavigated this perceived defensive barrier:

> *"I thought I've got him! [laughs] I've got him, that's the killer question, that's the thing that's made him go, 'Shit, no, it's not, I'm not getting results because of …', so yes, I was delighted at that point when he went silent because I thought, 'Got him', that for me was a real success point, was 'I've actually got this person to think about this and think about it in a way where it's made him go silent', for someone that talks a lot, that was quite an achievement!"* HR4 reporting delight at getting past perceived defensiveness

5.3 Provider actions

Participants were asked to describe how they delivered feedback, including how they facilitated acceptance and change. Several stages were apparent in their reports, commencing with how the participants anticipated and prepared for the exchange, through to following up with recipients on any changes made. These five stages are detailed below:

- Preparing to give feedback
- Building the relationship
- Presenting the data
- Facilitating recognition and acceptance
- Facilitating change

Preparing to give feedback

All of the interviewees talked about how they prepared for a feedback conversation and the extra preparation they would undertake if they anticipated an adverse reaction. This preparation took two broad forms, firstly scrupulous revision of the available data (e.g. analysing a 360º report, note-taking) and secondly, preparing responses to anticipated objections and defensiveness in the recipient (e.g. identifying specific data to emphasise or particular questions to ask).

However, it is worth noting that, as an exception to the above, some (generalist) feedback giving was spontaneous and unplanned and a direct response to observed events, given in the heat of the moment:

"It was almost an impulsive thing. I just had to say it, I just had to say it. I mean it was a shocking way he was dealing with that individual. It was almost like some sort of domestic abuse was going on in the next house or whatever in the next flat. That someone was beating someone up and then coming out and feeling guilty about it. That's what it was like and I just had, it was the third time I think that I'd experienced it. I wasn't brave enough the first twice and the third time I just... Out it came, but I still delivered it in a way that... I didn't shout and scream at him or anything, I just said, 'God [name of recipient]'. I can actually remember that like it was yesterday that particular moment." HR1 describing giving spontaneous, unplanned feedback.

Building the relationship

Several participants described how they deliberately built the relationship with recipients before giving feedback. However, there were few instances where an interviewee reported explicitly contracting the relationship as in a formal coaching relationship. Only one participant appeared to discuss confidentiality or other boundaries with the recipient, despite the complexity of relationships in which they operated. Relationship building, therefore, appeared largely confined to establishing their positive intent and initial rapport building:

"I always think for those types of feedback sessions and the 360s, the quicker you can build a relationship with the person, the better. So, my approach was always to do a welcome call so that we could chew the cud, get to know each other and say 'Right, you're going to do your 360, I'm going to be doing your feedback with you. Feel free to call me, email me any questions that you've got', so initially you've got over that ... you've already got the grounding and the relationship." HR4 describing how the relationship was built in advance of a feedback session

Presenting the data

The participants alluded to some of the principles they used in delivering feedback data. This revealed many areas of commonality, but also some differences in approach. In general, participants believed it was important to give feedback directly and honestly, and with a developmental intent in mind.

> *"I think being honest and open, I think that's when people are most likely to accept it, by being yourself and being, I don't know, very enthusiastic about something someone did when you and the person are not quite ... It's being consistent, its being really serious about it, so people know you really mean it... just being yourself."* HR6 describing authenticity in feedback giving.

However, the interview data revealed some differences in how the participants enacted this, as well as tensions in approach:

- *Being balanced vs being authentic.* Many interviewees felt they should always give balanced feedback, i.e. ensuring equal weight to positive and negative feedback, irrespective of the thrust of the central feedback message. However, others disregarded the notion of balance altogether in the interests of authenticity and impact:

  "If there is something negative, I always try to also say something positive. So that it's not just negative." HR describing the desire to give balanced feedback

  "I could deliver a piece of a positive feedback without anything negative, that can be even more powerful. It could be exclusively positive feedback for one person. But even if

it just one piece of negative feedback, I'm fine with that." HR6 describing the value of not balancing feedback

- *Filtering the message vs being direct.* While most of the interviewees believed it was better to be 'straight' and 'direct' in giving feedback, some recognised that, on occasion, they consciously 'filtered' the message by modifying it or withholding all or part of it. This approach was justified as appropriate when they felt the message might hurt or damage the recipient, overwhelm them or added little value to them. 'Value' was usually defined as the information that could lead to an improvement, e.g. correction of a fault. However, the participants recognised that negative feedback was the aspect they were most likely to avoid, filter or water down. The HR participants therefore generally described themselves as being 'open up to a point'.

"... Because what you don't want is that person walking out there thinking, 'Oh my God, I'm crap, I can't do this, and everyone thinks I'm that' and you're going to crucify somebody at that point and they're not going to be able to pick themselves up." HR3 describing stressing positive feedback at an assessment centre

It is worth noting that participants said that filtering was less likely either when there was a good relationship with the recipient, or when they had been given express permission to give feedback. This included situations in which the recipient specifically sought out feedback. In these circumstances, the feedback-givers appeared to feel that they had permission to be more authentic and direct in how they delivered feedback:

"If that person asks for feedback, I think it's okay to comment on everything, on facial expressions, on body language, on the used words, on the voice, on everything. It could be also on the clothes but if the person didn't ask for feedback and I would like to say something, then I want to just concentrate on the most important things and not everything." HR2 describing giving the impact of permission on scope/depth of feedback given.

Finally, some of the interviewees noted how their own biases and relationship with conflict played out in how they avoided or filtered (negative) feedback.

"I think that's a personal one. It's probably linked to me not being very confrontational, I can't say I particularly enjoy it, so that's why I, am better at delivering positive feedback" HR6 describing dislike of giving negative feedback for reasons of conflict avoidance.

- *Being objective vs being implicated.* The participants espoused 'being objective' and unbiased in delivery of feedback Most believed they were able to deliver feedback in a neutral depersonalised way and were able to 'bracket' own opinions and experience of the recipient. However, some participants were also aware that total detachment was difficult, especially when working alongside recipients on a day-day basis:

"I definitely can be objective rather than subjective, however I believe that a 360 is good when it's delivered by someone who doesn't know the individual so well and I would more than likely get one of my colleagues, to come and deliver that, so that the person doesn't feel that I've put my personal slant on it because I know her so well" HR 3 describing the potential for subjectivity in feedback.

Participants reported taking active steps to maintain their neutrality. For example, one generalist discussed the dangers of passing on 'gossip' to his line manager without validation by cross-checking sources and evidence. For others, 'being objective' meant only passing on observations they had directly witnessed for themselves. Another participant, aware of the dangers of 'pre-wiring' by others, described attempting to separate organisational commentary about a recipient from their own direct experience of them:

"…And you put a story into it, and you start seeing situations that don't actually exist and … and I think it's maybe sometimes separating out between stories and gossip and opinions about situations" HR5 describing potential 'pre-wiring' of a recipient.

A further facet of 'being objective' is worth noting. 360º/ multi-rater feedback assessments and psychometric assessments were frequently used in combination as mutually reinforcing evidence and seemed to be used to provide definitive (psychological) explanations of the recipient. There was, therefore, no apparent questioning of the validity of this approach, or indeed, of the instruments/ data sources used.

"…so, in the MBTI report, there's the, I think it's Page 4 where it gives you all the indicators that might be true for leadership, for your own development, for where you might want to focus more on. I tend to take people through that and then it generally correlates with that's come through from the 360 feedback, good and not so good." HR4 describing the use of MBTI and 360 assessment reports to identify development needs.

Facilitating recognition and acceptance

Rather than merely relaying feedback data, all the participants, to varying extents, reported taking further steps to ensure the recipient recognised and accepted the information. Two broad types of approach to ‘facilitating recognition’ were evident. Firstly a ‘push’ approach where the feedback provider appeared to assert the feedback and attempted to persuade the recipient by force of argument or weight of evidence. Secondly, a ‘pull’ approach where the feedback provider appeared to help the recipient to explore the feedback without necessarily taking a position or expressing an opinion.

This ‘push’ approach seemed more typically deployed in instances where the participant had direct personal experience of the recipient’s behaviour and was, therefore, more common in the generalist group. At its simplest, this meant repetition of the central feedback message, evidenced with examples if available. However, as the quote below suggests, this sort of feedback provision could also be very direct and unpremeditated, and the language used spontaneous and often emotional.

> *“And I don't know, something inside me I just said, ‘X you're going to kill that guy,’ I remember it like it was yesterday. I said, ‘You're going to kill that guy’, I said, ‘You've got to lay off him now. Give the guy a break, give him a chance’. And his response was, ‘He's failed again this week’."* HR1 describing confronting a leader with their behaviour

In contrast, those using a ‘pull’ approach, typically the specialists, appeared to rely more on a coaching approach as a means of getting the recipients to recognise the data. This approach was variously described as seeking permission to give feedback, using open questions to explore the data, taking a non-judgemental stance, or taking a future-focused stance. For example, the following quote illustrates how HR2 used a questioning approach to help the recipient leader make a connection between their behaviour and the feedback they had received:

> *"I asked him if he remembered special situations, why people may have given this feedback. 'Is there a special situation that you can remember? Why may people have got this impression of you?', and so I tried to pull out some explanation. And during this reflection and explaining to me, he then agreed and said, 'Oh yes, okay, I can understand, maybe I was too tough, or I didn't take enough time to explain' and things like this. And then, when he understood where it came from, it was very easy then to agree on things he would like to change.* HR2-1, HR2 using a questioning approach to help a recipient to recognise and accept 360º/ multi-rater feedback.

This 'pull' approach appeared also used to question the recipient at a deeper level on issues of personal values, identity and reputation. For example, a common technique used was to validate the recipient's positive motives behind their actions whilst drawing their attention to the negative impact this behaviour had on others or indeed themselves.

> *"I explain, 'This is how I got it, this is how I perceived it, maybe your intention was different, I cannot see what your intention was, but this is how I got it, so I just want to explain to you how I received it and maybe this is not matching with how you wanted to bring it to others, so maybe you should think about it'."* HR2 explaining how she made sense of a recipient's feedback.

A questioning approach was also used when the recipient did not appear to have a clear motivation to care about the feedback or saw it as irrelevant. For example, in the following quote, HR4 countered initial resistance to 360º/ multi-rater data by exploring the recipient's desired reputation and the impact they wished to make in the future:

> *"I just remember talking to him about it and he was very much, 'They can think what they think, I'm happy in me, I'm happy in myself, I don't really care what they say'. I didn't know whether it was a bit of a defence mechanism because we carried on the conversation and I asked him if that was the impact he wanted to have when he looked at these quotes and he went silent. He just said 'No, no it's not' and then we went on to talk about 'Well, what is the impact that you want to have and what might you need to do differently, to have that reaction?'."* HR4-1, HR4 exploring personal reputation as a means of facilitating feedback acceptance

Table 5-3 below shows roughly equal use of both styles, with the specialist group appearing to rely on more on 'pull' styles, while the generalist group seemed to report more use of 'push' styles. However, in five of the incidents, it was not possible to detect a dominant approach.

Table 5-3: Feedback incidents by approach type (push vs pull)

Result of change	Push approach evident	Pull approach evident	Approach unclear from data
Immediate change		HR2-1 Specialist H3-1 Specialist HR4-3 Specialist HR5-1 Generalist	
Delayed change	HR1-2 Generalist HR3-3 Generalist	HR4-1 Specialist	HR1-1 Generalist HR4-4 Specialist HR6-1 Specialist
No change	HR1-3 Generalist HR3-2 Generalist HR4-2 Specialist HR4-5 Specialist	HR5-2 Generalist	HR2-2 Specialist HR6-2 Specialist

To summarise, it was evident that the feedback-givers used a range of strategies to gain acceptance of feedback and persuade recipients of its veracity. It is worth noting that on occasion their chosen approach appeared not to work and instead, and participants reported that acceptance only appeared to come about after the recipient had time to reflect on the feedback or check that data with trusted sources:

> *"I think he didn't immediately accept it at all, I think when he left the room he was quite frustrated because he was expecting to get an incredibly fantastic, wonderful feedback because he was also very ambitious and he still is and that was frustrating for him, that we did not see how wonderful he was and that we had given him some quite critical feedback, But then he reflected on it, it took him some time, it was his reflecting that helped and that was part of the programme. He did talk to me later, it was a few days later and he was saying, 'Do you know when you told me, and I was*

trying to defend? Maybe you were right', this is what he was saying, 'And I need to think about how to do things differently'." HR6-1, reporting delayed acceptance of feedback after giving critical feedback

Facilitating change

A few participants reported going beyond facilitating recognition and acceptance and described actively encouraging the participants to explore potential changes they might want to make in response to the feedback.

> *"…And if the person wants to speak a little bit more about it, also not just give the feedback and go away but also try to find out how this could look better, what the person could do about it. So, to find solutions together with the person."* HR2 describing finding solutions with the recipient.

'Facilitating change' also extended, in a few cases, to follow up with the recipient on changes made and offering further feedback as and when requested. However, this was only featured in the generalist incidents and was not apparent in the specialist's narratives.

> *"He was very open to my feedback and I know that going forward, he will still remain open to feedback, this individual particularly would seek me out as a sounding block I would say, so there's a trust there."* HR6 describing the likelihood of the feedback recipient seeking further feedback.

5.4 Provider sense-making – HR professionals

In addition to describing actual feedback incidents, HR participants were asked to articulate what guided them when giving feedback and the conditions they believed led to feedback acceptance rather than rejection. As noted above, while all the interviewees had some basic coaching skills training, none had specific training in feedback giving and were not able to articulate any particular theory or model that guided their practice. However, all the interviewees had definite opinions on how feedback should be given, sharing many beliefs and assumptions but also differing on other points.

5.4.1 Factors perceived as influencing feedback acceptance

Constructive delivery

Participants attributed successful feedback delivery, at least in part, to how the feedback was delivered. There was broad agreement that feedback should be given with positive and developmental intent, be objective and well-evidenced with specific examples if necessary. There was also agreement that the tone of feedback provision should be non-threatening and non-judgemental, but at the same time, honest and direct. Participants, therefore, appeared cognisant of balancing several tensions and needs, in order to deliver the message effectively.

> *"So, although I can be direct with people I can still do it I think in quite an empathetic way. So, I try and tune in, be direct, but do it in a way that delivers the tone of the directs. It's how you deliver those messages." HR1 describing balancing directness and empathy in giving feedback*

Trusting Relationship

Beyond 'constructive delivery', all the participants variously stressed the need for a highly trusting and confidential relationship with the recipient as a prerequisite to giving feedback. This echoed findings in the Leader interviews (Section 4.2.4 above). Indeed, the strength of the relationship was seen as enabling more candid and authentic feedback, expanding the scope/depth of what was discussable, whilst minimising the potential for shame:

> *"It was a very comfortable kind of environment and that confidentiality, and it's that kind of feeling that 'I can trust you; I know whatever I say to you isn't going to go any further and you're not going to laugh at me or think that I'm any less male or any less strong because of talking about this kind of stuff because you're asking me to talk about this kind of stuff."* HR4 describing conditions of trust and confidentiality.

The HR generalists appeared to draw on their more intimate/ long-term relationship with the recipient leader as the basis of trust, seeing this as facilitating both more honest and more continuing feedback conversations.

> *"I made an effort in building a relationship with X, so I reached out to him in the early days, and him and I always got along reasonably well. But I made the effort to go and build that relationship. I think therefore now as my boss I felt the relationship was strong enough to allow me to give him that feedback. He often used to call me and ask me to sort of comment. I felt that that brought me closer to him, and I felt repeatedly confident that he actually trusted and valued my opinion. Well he actually told me that, and other people told me that I'm one of the people that X actually listens to. So, it's very important that you continue to provide that feedback"* HR1 describing building a strong relationship with his line manager

In contrast and as noted above, the HR specialists seemed to have a more distant and less intimate relationship with their feedback recipients. However, they too stressed the importance of a trusting relationship but saw this as founded on their perceived impartiality and use of 'expert' methods and tools.

Recipient receptivity to feedback – being 'open'

A third prime factor in explaining the success or failure of feedback was the extent to which the recipient was perceived as 'open' rather than 'closed'. Recipients who were receptive to discuss and reflect on the feedback, who showed minimal defensiveness and who were more generally engaged in their development were described as 'open':

> *"He was open to have honest conversations about anything or suggestions or you know, just basically talk about his career plans and things like that, so I always knew that he was really open, he wasn't a difficult feedback person at all."* HR3 describing the recipient's openness to feedback.

Additionally, 'openness' was also attributed to recipients perceived as holding a degree of self-doubt or lacking in personal confidence:

> *"… But with M., there was obviously a chink in the armour and maybe there was a seed of doubt in his mind that we were just able to unpack but with S. it was different, so perhaps the difference is that one's an underlying self-confidence and one's perhaps a bit of bravado and perhaps M's got more bravado whereas S. is very self-assured and self-confident."* HR4 comparing feedback acceptance between two recipients.

5.4.2 Factors perceived as influencing feedback rejection

Recipient receptivity to feedback – being 'closed'

While feedback acceptance was attributed to several factors, the dominant factor cited to explain a recipient's rejection of feedback was their perceived 'closedness'. Recipients displaying defensive behaviours, an unwillingness or inability to reflect, or lack of engagement in personal development were all described as 'closed':

> *"The feedback session was very short because he was not really open to answer my questions, he was not open to reflect, he said 'No, I'm going to do this alone, I don't need your help, I know where the feedback comes from' and so he was not willing to speak with me about this."* HR6 describing lack of openness to feedback.

> *"I had some conversations with him, his line manager, the general manager at the time had some conversations with him but whatever we said, it didn't seem to get through, it was everyone else, he was right, and others were wrong."* HR5-2, HR generalist describing the closed nature of a feedback recipient.

As noted above, when confronted with a 'closed' recipient, there appeared to be a tendency to pass negative judgement or make assumptions about the recipient, ascribing their attitudes variously to arrogance, high levels of self-confidence, fear of negative evaluations or as masking personal insecurities.

> *"He challenged the tool; he was just an oddball."* HR4-5. HR specialist rationalising reasons for rejection of psychometric

> *“ ’You cannot teach me anything’ and whenever I speak to him, he has a self-image that is, ‘I’ve done all these before and you can’t teach me anything, I'm really good at what I do ... but I’ll come along and I’ll participate and I’ll contribute’ but he’ll never, that was a 40-minute conversation with the GAPS grid, which was very transactional and very pompous*!” HR4-2, specialist giving 360 feedback to a leader before a leadership training course.

There also appeared to be a tendency to attribute ‘closedness’ as a fixed personality quality or to see such behaviours as borne out of negative past experiences, e.g. a dysfunctional family history or a toxic work culture.

> *“In some of the conversations we did have, it came out about his family and being part of a large family, having several brothers and sisters and they’d all gone onto be either lawyers or medics, And I think, I saw him as a successful person but in his eyes, I don't think he felt his family saw him as successful, the fact that he was operating within a factory and the kind of role that he was doing, so whilst he came across as quite bolshie and arrogant, beneath it I did see some deep issues and concerns and insecurities.”* HR5-2, HR generalist explaining reasons for rejection of 360 feedback.

> *“I think he worked in a company called [ABC]…. It used to have a very strong cadre of ex-military, ex-American military people in it. I think that style was quite prevalent in [ABC]. It's probably changed a bit now, but I think he probably felt well this is the norm, this is how you deal with stuff.”* HR1-1, explaining the reasons for his line managers behaviour and rejection of feedback

However, it is worth noting that one generalist seemed to have a less binary view of feedback receptivity, seeing it not as a function of the recipient's personality or background, but more to do with the specifics of the message:

> *"I think a lot of people are scared to give him feedback. He actually is very receptive to it [feedback], With K it's almost like once he understands something… he's very analytical. But once he understands and he rationalises it, reflects on it... It's not he doesn't understand it, it's not a capability thing, he was able quite quickly to change that behaviour. He comes back at the end of these meetings and he'll say, 'How do you think I did?'."* HR1 describing the recipient's willingness to act on feedback once understood.

Lack of skills in giving feedback

While it appeared more common to attribute feedback rejection to qualities of the recipients, two interviewees blamed themselves as much as the recipients for their inability to get the recipient to accept the feedback.

> *"I'm happy to sit down and have the conversations, give him feedback, tell him how he was impacting on people. I didn't have a problem with doing that but just getting him to listen and think about his behaviour, I just … maybe I wasn't saying or doing the right things to make that happen."* HR5-2, HR generalist describing difficulties in getting feedback acceptance.

5.5 Analysis and interpretation

The following section presents an analysis and personal interpretation of the data presented in sections 5.1 – 5.4 above, intending to explicate further the experiences of providing feedback, and the perceived processes and conditions involved in facilitating acceptance and change.

5.5.1 HR provider's experiences of feedback

As has been noted above, in marked contrast to the leader interviews, all the HR participant interviews majored on delivery of negative/critical feedback and their experience of succeeding or failing to overcome perceived recipient resistance. To a greater or lesser extent, this appeared to be an uncomfortable experience for the participants which they associated with apprehension and negative imagining in advance, and a sense of challenge and frustration in the moment of delivery. While the more experienced seemed to take this in their stride, others reported feeling exposed and at the limits of their competence. It was also clear that the lack of constructive response to feedback created some very strong emotional reactions in the providers. However, none described debriefing such feelings with a colleague or line manager or testing their assumptions about the recipient. Any training they might have received in provision would also appear inadequate to prepare them for the (more extreme) reactions they might encounter or provide them with strategies to deal with them. It also might suggest that line management supervision of feedback providers could be more active in their support.

While the participants sincerely held developmental intentions, it was clear that the feedback given was primarily remedial, rather than designed to expand the capacities and capabilities of the recipients. For example, there was no reported discussion of a leader's strengths and how these could be leveraged to better effect in the workplace. It also appeared that the prime 'client' for the feedback was often the organisation rather than the recipient. Feedback giving was therefore legitimised to prevent or minimise poor behaviours and to bring those behaviours in line with expected norms of the organisation. Feedback provision, particularly from HR generalists, might therefore be construed (by recipients) as serving a policing function rather a developmental function.

While all the participants espoused holding an objective, unbiased and neutral position, it appeared that this was difficult to achieve given their embeddedness in the organisation and the complexity and conflicting nature of the roles they were expected to enact. In particular, the HR generalists seemed (variously) sensitised to the difficulties of serving the needs of many stakeholders and holding appropriate confidentiality whilst maintaining a productive working relationship with the recipient. However, given their many roles, it is perhaps unsurprising that developmental feedback was blurred with other objectives and priorities, and in some accounts, providing feedback was conflated with professional advice-giving.

While the specialists might be better placed to claim ‘objectivity’ through their relative distance from recipients, it was clear that a degree of ‘pre-wiring’ was common, and it appeared not unusual for them to be coloured by other’s views. There was also an apparent strong dependence and belief in instrument-based feedback as ‘objective’ feedback. Thus 360º/ multi-rater feedback was seen as an objective reality as opposed to a collation of subjective opinions. In the case of psychometric feedback, there was a tendency to see this as a complete and accurate explanation of the recipient's behaviour, rather than as a comparative measure of responses against specifically defined constructs.

It also appeared that an informal feedback 'escalation' process was in operation in the study organisation, with problematic recipients passed to increasingly specialist resources. Figure 5-3 below depicts how this process appeared to function and suggests that feedback provision becomes increasingly dependent on relayed opinions or mediated through instruments as the level of escalation increased. This implies that providers towards the end of the process are more likely to be dealing with more resistant and informed individuals, but without extensive personal experience of, or relationship with them.

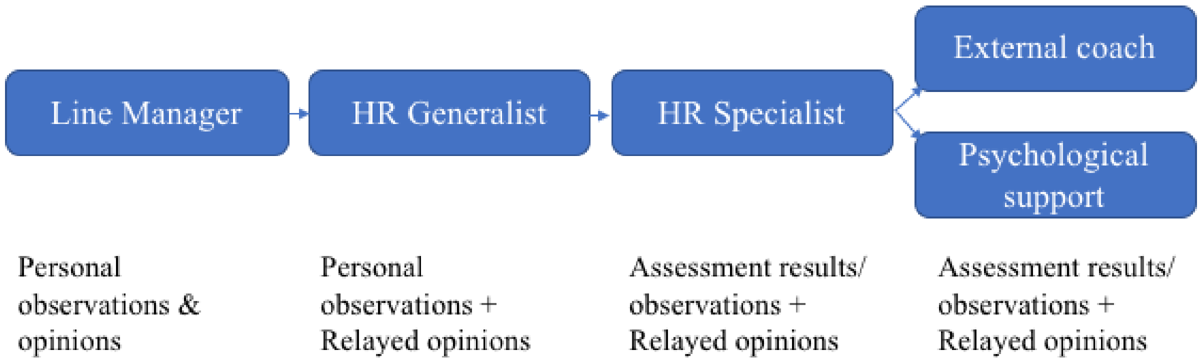

Figure 5-3: Potential feedback escalation process

5.5.2 Provider actions – provider ways of working

None of the participants reported any particular theoretical stance as guiding their practice in giving feedback. However, references to concepts such as 'raising self-awareness' and leadership 'blind spots' were common, indicating perhaps the influence of the emotional intelligence literature (Goleman, 1998a, 1998b; Goleman et al., 2002)) and the 'Johari window' model (Luft, 1961, 1969). It also suggests a dominant narrative of the 'unaware' leader, blind to their limitations and impact on others.

It could be argued that the apparent dominant stance was objectivist and behaviourist. The central aim appeared to be discrepancy reduction, guiding recipients to correct their behaviours towards accepted external norms. Feedback was seen as an objective 'truth' with the role of the provider to awaken recipients to this. HR providers appeared to see themselves as unbiased and objective reporters of this 'truth', whilst simultaneously downplaying the many ways in which they 'filtered' the message.

Section 5.3 summarised the methods and processes employed by the participants to facilitate acceptance and change. This data would suggest that the HR participants construed a broadly similar process of feedback giving, as summarised below in Figure 5-4.

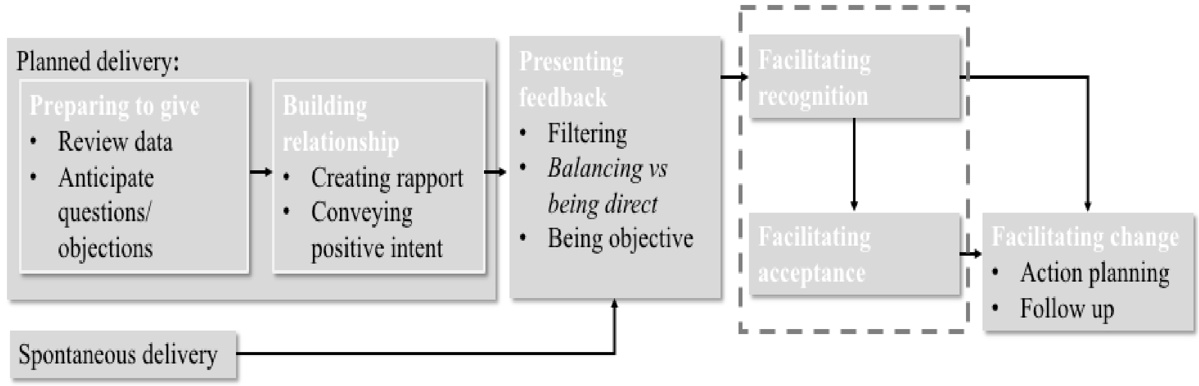

Figure 5-4: Feedback provision process - HR participants perspective

As noted above, the initial stages of this process differed somewhat depending on whether the trigger for feedback was a planned intervention, or in given in spontaneous reaction to observed events. In the former situation, the providers (usually the specialists) prepared for the feedback interaction and took steps to create/build the relationship with the recipient. In contrast, spontaneous feedback (usually from the generalists) appeared to by-pass these earlier stages, with feedback given in a more direct and unfiltered manner.

Once the provider had presented the data, participants worked to facilitate recognition and acceptance of the information. Figure 5-5 below proposes a model of the processes of recognition and acceptance as used by HR participants.

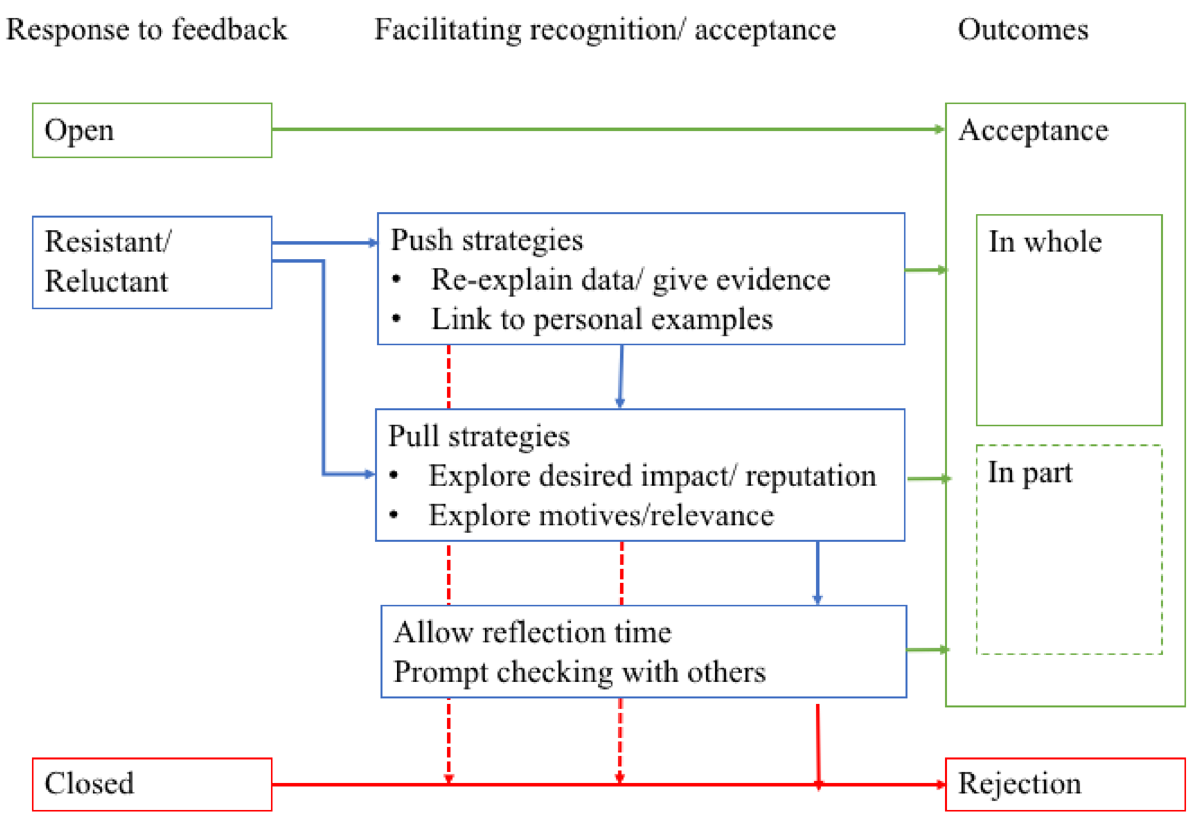

Figure 5-5: Facilitating feedback recognition and acceptance – HR participant perspective

This model suggests that in situations where recipients appeared reluctant to accept the feedback, the initial strategy was to 'push' for recognition. This was facilitated variously by re-explaining the evidence and message further and if necessary, helping the recipient see a connection between their feedback and their day-day behaviours. If this proved insufficient, the recipient providers were then faced with a choice of giving up on their attempts to persuade or to shift the emphasis from ‘push’ strategies to ‘pull’ strategies. These ‘pull’ style strategies appeared more exploratory than directional and made use of a coaching style of questioning. For example, the participants helped the recipients to explore their motivations and interests, enabling them to connect the issues they cared about with the feedback received. Once recognition and acceptance had been achieved the participants were able to move to an action planning phase with appropriate follow-up.

‘Open’ recipients were construed as people who were more likely to recognise and accept any feedback, whereas ‘closed’ recipients were likely to move more immediately to outright rejection. Reluctant recipients were seen as variably responsive to ‘push’ and ‘pull’ strategies and final acceptance as potentially partial rather than whole.

The model also suggests that if ‘push’ or ‘pull’ strategies failed to create acceptance, then the only strategy available to providers was a retreat, leaving the recipient to reject it entirely, reflect on it or to validate it with significant others. It is worth noting that a period of reflection following feedback provision often resulted in later recognition and acceptance. It could, therefore, be argued that feedback providers underplay the need for recipients to conduct their sense-making and validation before acceptance can be achieved.

This process model will be compared with that arising from the coach interview data and will be further discussed in Chapter 6.5.2.

5.5.3 HR participants' reasons for responses to feedback

Section 5.4 above detailed how HR participants explained the reasons for feedback acceptance or rejection. Table 5-4 below consolidates this material, using the same categorisation of factors as in Chapter 4 to facilitate comparisons.

This table suggests a complex interrelationship of many factors influencing feedback responses. However, according to the HR participants, a prime determinant of feedback response was the recipients' receptivity to feedback, i.e. the extent to which they were 'open' or 'closed'. After this, the presence of a trusting relationship with the recipient was seen as a second important contributory factor, with providers stressing the need to establish rapport and respect with recipients. Emphasis was also was placed on the process of delivery, and there appeared to be a general assumption that their ways of working were constructive although it was clear that HR providers employed a variety of 'push' and 'pull' influence strategies to different effect. As with the leader findings, there was some dispute regarding whether feedback should always be balanced or whether it was better to be candid and direct.

In comparison to the leader data, less stress was placed on the credibility of feedback data as an important factor and HR providers seemed to assume this was usually objective, and trustworthy. HR participants also tended to underplay how their attitudes and beliefs regarding feedback provision appeared to condition feedback conversations. For example, it was clear that prior experience of poor leadership behaviours (negatively) coloured their view of recipients, particularly when a remedial intervention was requested by line management. It was also quite usual for HR providers to have been 'pre-wired' by colleagues before meeting a 'problematic' recipient.

Table 5-4: The reasons given for feedback acceptance/rejection – HR participant data

Input factors	Relational factors	Process factors	Recipient factors	Provider factors	Contextual factors
Credible data – not hearsay or gossip, evidenced, objective.	**Trusting relationship** – non-judgmental of the recipient, unbiased, developmental intent, trusted and respected by recipient, rapport established with the recipient	**Constructive delivery** – honest, evidenced, objective, prepared in advance, gets past defences, well-timed. **Balance vs Direct* **Influence approach** – P*ush vs pull*, the extent of filtering, use of reflection **Use of a coaching approach*	**Receptivity to feedback** - open vs closed person (caused by underlying issues), attitudes to learning, level of self-confidence/ security	**Attitudes to feedback provision** – own motives, confidence in giving feedback, attitudes to conflict. Source of legitimisation, perceived role, use of positional/ expert power **Attitudes to feedback recipient(s) –** the extent of pre-wiring by others, extent/ nature of prior relationship, loyalty to organisation vs individual	**Perception of feedback culture** – expectations of HR role, beliefs regarding performance management, prior experience of (poor) leadership behaviours

*Key: *Text in italics represents disputed perspectives.*

Loyalty was therefore displayed, in varying degrees, to both the development agenda of the recipient and to the needs of the organisation.

Lastly, legitimisation was drawn from two prime sources, firstly, their position in the organisation and the expectations placed on the HR role, and secondly their use of psychometric instruments and other assessments. Tools and other instruments were seen as a source of legitimisation, as was their role in the organisation.

Table 5-4 suggests both some similarities but also some significant differences in how HR providers and recipient leaders construe and experience feedback exchange and will be further explored in Chapter 7: Comparisons.

Chapter 6: Findings – Coach participants

This chapter presents a summary of the themes emerging from the analysis of coach participant interview transcripts, resulting from the methods described in section 3.2.3 above. In order to facilitate comparisons with the HR and leader participant groups, findings are presented using the following headings:

- Context to data – an overview of the six coach interview participants and the feedback incidents they recounted (section 6.1)
- Provider experiences of giving feedback– the reported phenomenological experience of the external coach participants in response to giving (developmental) feedback to a leader. (Section 6.2)
- Provider actions– an overview of the reported ways of working and methods of delivering feedback (Section 6.3).
- Provider sense-making – how the external coaches explained responses to their feedback and the conditions they felt led recipients to accept or reject it. Differences in attitudes towards feedback provision are also noted (Section 6.4)

Typical quotes from interview transcripts are used throughout to illustrate themes and discussion points. The chapter concludes with an interpretation of results (Section 6.5), drawing initial comparisons with the HR participants, as detailed in Chapter 5 above. Chapter 7 provides a more in-depth comparison between both provider groups, as well as reporting on differences in perspective with the recipient leader group.

6.1 Context to data

6.1.1 Overview of Coach participants

The six external coach participants (Appendix 12) comprised two sub-groups. Coaches 1-3 were all full-time professional coaches with considerable coaching experience. Coaches 4-6 were learning and development specialists, who offered coaching alongside other development activities, e.g. leadership development programmes, skills training, team development. While this latter group were less experienced as coaches, they were more likely to have had a prior relationship with their feedback recipients, typically as participants on their development events.

All six coaches had a continuing commercial relationship with the study organisation; however, only two coaches (C1 and C2) worked for the organisation's preferred coach supplier. The remaining four coaches sourced work via a combination of personal relationships and recommendations, or as a spin-off from delivery of the organisation's various leadership development programmes. Three interviewees (C1, C4 and C6) were practising in the UK, with the rest operating in different locations around the world including Singapore (C1), USA (C3) and Ireland (C5). Four of the coaches were female, and 2 were male (C4 and C5).

While the coach interviewees had both more experience and training in coaching (particularly Coaches 1-3) than the HR participants, most had little formal training in giving feedback, learning to give feedback via general management training or training to administer psychometrics. None had any particular theory that guided their practice in this area. However, they alluded to a range of related concepts such as Johari Window (Luft, 1961,

1969) and ‘self-awareness’(Goleman, 1998a, 1998b; Goleman et al., 2002) as well as referring to positive psychology (Peterson and Seligman, 2004), neuro-linguistic programming and ‘feedforward’. As a group, they were also apparently well versed in different feedback delivery models, citing a range of tools/formulas.

6.1.2 Overview of feedback incidents

In total, the coaches recounted some 15 feedback incidents (Appendix 8) which had occurred at some point during a coaching assignment. Of these, 11 resulted in some form of change and 4 in rejection and no change (see Table 6-1 below). Of the incidents resulting in change, a majority (8) involved some form of delay, i.e. the participant reported the recipient as needing to reflect on the feedback or showing some form of resistance to it before eventual acceptance and later change.

In contrast to the HR incidents, the coach incidents appeared more complex in that the coaches were more likely to report combined use of multiple forms of feedback throughout a coaching assignment. For example, in the initial sessions, it was not unusual for (one or more) psychometric instruments to be used, along with a 360º/ multi-rater feedback, with ‘in the moment’ feedback being deployed in later sessions. However, when asked to focus on the feedback that led to change (or no change), participants tended to single out a particular type of feedback exchange as instrumental. This ‘prime‘ feedback is shown in Table 6-1 below. However, it is worth noting that in one incident (C3-4) the coach attributed the change to the client’s self-realisation, rather than to the feedback intervention.

Table 6-1: Coach incidents by feedback source and the resultant outcome.

		Outcome (No. incidents			Total no incidents
		Rapid Acceptance	Delayed Accceptance	No change	
Types of feedback	Personal observation in the workplace		**1** (2)	**1** (1)	**2** (3)
	'In the moment' feedback	**3** (0)	**2** (2)	**1** (2)	**6** (4)
	Psychometric debrief	0 (2)	**3** (2)	0 (1)	3 **(5)**
	360º/ multi-rater feedback		**1**	**2** (1)	**3**(1)
	Other (self-realisation)		**1**		1(0)
	Totals	**3** (2)	**8** (6)	**4** (5)	**15** (13)

[Key: Figures in bold related to prime feedback sources mentioned. Figures in brackets refer to other forms of feedback mentioned in the account]

In comparison to the HR interviewees, the coach participants reported more use of psychometric assessments (8 incidents) and use of their own direct experience of the client in the form of 'in the moment' feedback (10 incidents). There was also less reported use of 360º/ multi-rater feedback (4 incidents). However, similar to the HR interviewees, the coach interviewees described giving feedback based on personal observations (5 incidents), albeit solely in a developmental rather than workplace context.

Table 6-2 below shows the various sources of feedback deployed by the coach participants, giving a typical context and illustrative quote.

Table 6-2: Illustrative examples of feedback types deployed by coach participants

Type of Feedback	**Typical context**	**Example quote**
Live-action / observational feedback	Coach supporting sales skills programme. Feedback was given between visits to customer sites on sales skills and interpersonal communication style	*"Because, she heard the message ... and we'd also talked through about what she was going try again. What she, you know, she was telling me, OK, this time I can try this, and try that, and I said, 'OK, well, OK, go with that'."* C1-2
'In the moment ' – direct observations and personal experience of the client	Coach playing back their observations of the client within a coaching session	*"I will often give feedback as part of a challenge. So, I guess my style is to say, 'This is what I'm seeing, and it seems to me…', and I create the story, 'And you're wanting to do this', so I will pack it and sort of throw it at them."* C2-1
Psychometric instrument – debrief of reports	Coach debriefing psychometric instrument and discussing implications for client and client's relationships with others	*"I've been doing some work with the leadership team, and part of that was individual strength profiling or feedback. And there was a particular sales guy that was quite opposite to the CEO …And it was very clear there was a clash."* C6-2
360º/ multi-rater feedback – debrief of report	Coach debriefing 360/multi-rater data and discussing implications and possible area to address.	*"So, there were comments around, 'What is it that this person's doing really well, that you'd want them to continue doing? And what is it that you would like them to think about doing differently and to do, and to start doing?"* C6-1

While the specific triggers for coaching were many and various, they broadly fell into two groups. The first group (9 incidents) were instigated to remediate some sort of workplace issue or behavioural problem. These issues included negative behavioural impact, performance issues and problems of personal organisation. Notably, at least three of the coaching assignments were set up to specifically address issues that had come to light as a result of earlier feedback, i.e. had been escalated for intervention by an internal HR professional. The second group (6 incidents), featured developmental concerns, including skill development, life transition issues, promotion preparation, as well as feedback (e.g. 360º/ multi-rater feedback and FIRO feedback) given in preparation for attending in-house leadership development programmes.

In terms of feedback valence, nearly all the incidents included some degree of critical feedback. However, in comparison to HR participants, the coaches described giving both positive and negative feedback messages, for example, debriefing both sides of a 360º/ multi-rater report or a psychometric report. There were no purely affirmative feedback incidents as in the leader interviewees; however, there were two examples of coaches (C3 and C6) using a ‘strengths-based’ instrument as part of their approach. Notably, in all four incidents of rejected feedback, the central feedback message was highly critical of the recipient.

6.2 Coach experiences of providing feedback

This section summarises the participants' reported themes concerned with lived experience of providing feedback to a leader, including their motivations to give feedback, their perceived sources of 'legitimisation', as well as their 'in the moment' felt experiences.

6.2.1 Being motivated to give feedback

The coaches described a variety of motivations to give feedback, primarily reporting a desire to contribute to the learning and growth of their clients. As with HR participants, they felt that leader behaviour had a disproportionate impact on their subordinates and teams, as well as on the overall organisational culture. However, they also felt that many subordinates found it difficult to 'speak truth to power', and that genuinely candid feedback could often only come from those external to the system. They, therefore, felt that external coaches had an essential role in ensuring leaders fully heard (critical) feedback and of being a necessary conduit for feedback between different layers of the organisation.

> *"The best outcome that I might achieve here is simply to leave the evidence and the feedback standing at the end of the session and not let it be dismissed. So that was one thing to make sure of because at the end of the day these were people who had taken a bit of personal risk and put information for him to see"* C4 describing the importance of being a feedback conduit to a leader.

Many also cited poor organisational practices as a motivation for them to give feedback. Many felt that leaders received insufficient feedback, or that it was often unskilfully delivered by their superiors, even to the point of being potentially damaging. Additionally, several argued that the formal feedback mechanisms used in the study organisation, such as performance reviews, were inadequate, or too infrequent to be developmentally useful.

> *"So, I don't think we give our leaders enough feedback. What I've noticed is I'll say, 'So, on your last performance review, who wrote it?', ' I did', 'Oh! So, you can write all the glowing reviews about you [that] you want, and your boss will just sign it?', 'Yup. They're a waste of my time'. I'm like, 'Yeah! Sounds like a waste of your time if you're not getting feedback' ."* C3 criticising an inadequate performance review.

While there were varying opinions regarding the overall quality and quantity of day-day feedback giving in the study organisation, most felt it was overly focused on task performance. Indeed, some argued that feedback giving was constrained to a few permissible topics, which did not include leadership style or impact unless formally instigated, for example, through development programmes.

> *"It's very interesting. Their ability to give direct, constructive feedback around health and safety is amazing, but that's because they've learned that lesson hard a number of times. And so therefore, I would love- I don't think they're quite at the place of where, from a leadership perspective, they can give feedback in the same way."* C5 commenting on lack of leadership-related feedback

However, in contrast to the HR participants, the coach participants variously emphasised the importance of providing leaders with a model or experience of good feedback provision. They felt that they had much to teach leaders about giving high-quality feedback and saw this as a route to potentially improving the quality of conversation between leader and subordinates. On a broader scale, some saw this as also having broader organisational implications, contributing to improvements in overall employee engagement and impacting positively on organisational culture.

> *"But I actually think the big key for feedback is leaders learning to do it in a very flexible, open and varied way in the way they operate. And for some reason, it never happens, and we wonder why engagement scores are low. And I actually think if they got these things right, we would have a far more engaged workforce*." C2 describing the value of leaders learning to give feedback effectively.

Several of the coaches also felt that by modelling good feedback provision, they would also become more likely to seek out feedback in the future.

6.2.2 Feeling legitimised to give feedback

All the coaches felt legitimised to give feedback from their role as an external coach, seeing feedback provision as an expected and necessary part of the overall coaching process. Many of the roles and purposes they described were mirrored in the HR participant accounts, particularly the HR specialist accounts. For example, many coaches expressed the purpose of giving feedback as 'raising the self-awareness' of the recipient. However, the coaches appeared to use a somewhat broader definition of this concept.

> *"It's that ability to really sort of, look in the mirror, and look into your soul, and really recognize who you are. Um, the good, the bad, and the ugly. So, recognize the impact of you on yourself, the impact of you on others. So, recognize that when you do some things in a certain way it makes you feel like that. But also, self-awareness is*

about how you recognize your impact. It is how you impact others as well. It's that impact that you have on others is then key, as well." C6 defining 'self-awareness'.

Many also felt their external perspective gave them an objective and unbiased stance, and that their coaching skills and specialist knowledge particularly equipped and positioned them to provide feedback.

"That's part of our skill, to be able to pick up some of those, in the body language, micro-expressions, all of that, to actually see whether is, um, landing, or how it's landing with them. And being able to challenge them through that." C1 describing the ability to give feedback effectively

As an additional source of perceived legitimacy, particular value was placed on their psychological understanding, and in particular, their ability to deploy and interpret psychometric instruments. Such instruments were generally seen as illuminating and beneficial to the recipients, although some coaches also recognised they could be regarded with suspicion (see section 6.3.3 below).

"But anything from FIRO-B Elements, MBTI, Hogan, STI, whatever you want to use ... there's something around using something that's based in theory and data and science to give an individual an objective view of how they behave and how they are as leader I think is useful", C5 describing the value of psychometric instruments to his practice.

Several coaches commented on being ‘licensed’ to give feedback by the commissioning coaching client as part of a remedial coaching assignment. This appeared to be seen as permission to give very direct feedback, even to the extent of providing advice and instruction. However, some also reported the difficulties a remedial contract set up with the coaching client, especially when the client felt under duress to take part in the coaching relationship (see section 6.3.1 below).

> *“ I had gotten a call from the company and they said, ‘If this person doesn't call you back by 3:00 today to schedule time with you, this person will be terminated… So (laughs) this person had no idea what coaching was, but she must need her job, so she called at like 2:55 in the afternoon … Made her appointment on what, and I went in, met with her face-to-face, and she was not open to coaching, feedback, nothing. She just thought she was there to save her job”* C3 describing a remedial coaching engagement.

6.2.3 Felt experience of providing feedback

When recalling giving feedback, the coach participants described meeting a wide range of responses ranging from immediate or delayed acceptance, through to resistance and rejection, and, on occasion, termination of the coaching relationship. Coaches appeared therefore often unsure about what reaction they would receive, particularly when giving negative/critical feedback. A degree of apprehension was reported before face-face sessions, and some participants described worrying about how best to present their feedback in order to avoid rejection.

"I knew he was going to be cynical, but, on the day, it was, 'Oohh, I can't break down the barriers', and that's where there the lack of chemistry, lack of rapport, is so raw. So, what happened was, you know, I'm there, and my job is to work with him in coaching. And I'm thinking, 'This is going to be miserable'. And it was." C1 anticipating negative reactions in a remedial coaching relationship

However, anticipated adverse reactions sometimes proved unfounded, and participants reported surprise and a degree of relief if they encountered a positive reception.

"I think I was more agitated in the previous weeks before this because I could see this in her, and I never knew quite how to say some of this stuff to her. So, I think all my agitation was earlier." C2 describing apprehension before a coaching session

"So, we had this initial feedback. And she had, she turned around and said, 'Yeah, I can see that, I, yeah, yeah'. She's very accepting and very agreeing. And I was like, 'Oh, this wasn't what I was expecting', being honest." C6 describing surprise at recipient's positive reaction to feedback

As with the HR participants, the coach participants seemed to find it easier to give positive feedback rather than negative feedback and to work with people whom they perceived as engaged in their personal development.

"And there's one person I'm working with at the moment, she's an absolute delight to work with, because straight away she's somebody that wants to learn. She knows she's got loads of skills to learn. And she's open to that… And, it has been an absolute

> *pleasure. She'll give me examples of what she's tried, and I can ask her questions, and I can challenge her quite hard."* C1, describing pleasure in working with an accepting client.

Conversively, they reported feeling perplexity, irritation, frustration and discomfort when faced with any (perceived) resistance and noted the difficulty of working with those who rejected their feedback. Other emotions, such as puzzlement and frustration, were also voiced. Some participants reported, on occasion, the desire to shy away or even walk away from the coaching engagement. None of the coaches, however, reported taking such difficulties to coaching supervision or any other form of support.

> *"There's one bit of me saying just get through this, give him the same as everybody else, in that respect you've lived up to the contract. Don't shy away from it. Share it all."* C4 describing discomfort of working with one 'resistant' client

> *"Everything that we talked about he just pushed back on. So, I tried to talk about things of interest, he pushed back on that. Uh, we were going somewhere, he pushed back on that. And we got to the end of the day, and, I - I just - I just wanted to walk away"* C1 describing the desire to end a coaching relationship.

6.3 Coach participant actions

While there were significant differences in how each participant facilitated feedback acceptance and change, there appeared to be some common stages of working:

- Building the relationship
- Contracting for feedback
- Deploying instruments
- Presenting the feedback
- Facilitating recognition and recipient sense-making
- Challenging the recipient
- Facilitating action planning and following up on changes made

The balance of this section explores each of the stages, noting similarities and difference in practice within the coach group.

Building the relationship

A common thread across all the coach interviews was an expressed belief that the strength of the working relationship was a key enabler of coaching effectiveness and a prime determinant of feedback acceptance.

> *"I think it's about building that trusted relationship. Same as coaching, since you know, if they've got trust of you and a rapport with you, you can give them the feedback. And... if I think about those examples I've given you that went really well, I have built trust with those people, and the more trust that I got, the more they were accepting straightaway. When I think about the way it didn't work, I'd be thrown into*

the deep end there. Didn't have a relationship with the individual ." C6 describing trust as a determinant of feedback receptivity.

The coaches all described how they went about building rapport in the initial stages of the coaching engagement or how they took active steps to improve a relationship when they felt it was not working. For example, in one incident, the coach reported a lack of personal 'chemistry' at the start of the coaching assignment as contributing to the rejection of her observational feedback. She then felt it necessary to pause the work in order to build a sufficiently trusting relationship .

> *"So, the next time we met, instead of him driving the agenda, I said, let's have a coffee. Let's sit down and have a coffee, because last time we met, it did not work. Everything - it just did not work. And now, we have a very productive relationship. But on that first ... It was the most uncomfortable first day, or first session I've had with somebody I've coached. And the main reason for me was that there was no, there was no chemistry there."* C1 describing building relationship with feedback recipient/ client

As has been noted above, one of the distinguishing features of the reported incidents was the remedial nature of most of the coaching assignments. Most coaches appeared highly sensitised to the problems this might create in setting up an effective working relationship and perceived an increased likelihood of defensive reactions to their feedback. To overcome this, the coaches responded in a variety of ways. For example, some coaches were at pains to stress their positive and developmental intent to the client and to reinforce that they were working for the recipient's benefit. Other coaches reported trading on their perceived position of neutrality, asking the recipients to ‘go with’ their feedback on trust. However, these approaches did not appear universally successful, and one coach chose to terminate the relationship when they felt they could not create an adequate connection with the client/recipient. Yet another coach agreed to refocus the coaching work onto less personal topics of discussion that the recipient would agree to participate in:

> *“So, one guy decided, ‘You know I really don't want to change anything about who I am, but I do need to start succession planning’. He goes, ‘No one here will work with me on that’. I'm like, ‘We can coach around that!" So, we just shifted our focus away from behaviours and things like that and went into, ‘What do you need to do to plan your succession? How does that look like?’. “* C3, agreeing to recontract the working relationship.

Contracting for feedback

In addition to attending to the quality of working relationship, coach participants reported attending to the boundaries of their work by creating an explicit coaching 'contract', and within this, a contract to provide feedback. Many of the coaches reported seeking permission to give candid feedback and challenge at the start of the engagement, testing the extent to which their recipients were willing to consider feedback:

> *“ I will say, in terms of my contract, ’I'm here to give you some constructive challenge, because it's all about moving forward. Do you want me to give you feedback? Do you want me to pick out things that I think could be absolutely critical for you?’ and if they say ‘Yes’, then I will do that. I much prefer to have it up front, especially with some of the senior people, because it's all about, in this short period of*

time, helping them, or getting them to make a pivotal change…And so we'll talk about 'How hard you do want me to push back. What can you tolerate? Are you gonna be willing to really, really look deeper than just surface level?'." C3 contracting for the degree of permissible challenge and feedback.

This permission seeking also appeared to extend beyond the initial contracting phase to asking permission to give feedback 'in the moment' as they had observations to make. However, it is also worth noting that one coach (C3) contracted not to give observational feedback, but rather to gain permission to give direct advice. This behaviour suggests, as with some HR participants, that some coaches hold a blurred distinction of what constitutes feedback.

"So, one of the main things I was trained in is that the coach doesn't bring their agenda or their story. It is about the client. And so, I, I do not give feedback unless I ask permission. Or if they specifically ask and say, "What would you do in this situation? And what I try really hard to do is make sure that they then generate two or three of their own ideas of what they would do before I give them any feedback. " C3 describing seeking permission to give advice.

Deploying instruments

A distinguishing feature of the incidents recounted was the high proportion that featured the use of psychometric instruments. It was clear from the interviews that psychometric instruments and personality assessments were commonly deployed and were seen as a highly impactful and valuable form of feedback. Indeed 4 of the six coaches described using some form of psychometric instrument in most of their coaching engagements.

> *"And that really ... It had a massive impact. I'd done Personality Styles with him, the Bolton & Bolton type personality stuff, but then he'd done Insights. And he realized then, it was a bit of a light bulb moment for him, doing that, and what was really good on the third session is that he came back and shared his Insights [report] with me."* C1-3, describing the impact of Personality Styles and Insights assessments

Psychometrics and other assessments appear to have been deployed often in the initial session(s) as a means of opening up the dialogue, or at a later stage in the assignment to illuminate a particular issue. While the organisation's preferences sometimes determined the choice of instruments, at least four of the coaches appeared to have one or more preferred instruments which they would frequently use. For example, Coach 3 deployed the same three psychometrics at the start of every coaching engagement, irrespective of the presenting issue or coaching agenda.

> *"I use a tool called the energy leadership index, which is an attitudinal assessment. So, I use Strengthsfinder, DISC, and the Attitudinal assessment, it's the only one of its kind… I do it before so that they can see a baseline indicator of where they are because I really don't want them to have any coaching before they see just how they're showing up and how, how they're being perceived by other people in the world*." C3 describing the use of psychometrics.

Overall, there seemed to be a tendency to see all psychometric feedback as providing a 'scientific' and objective categorisation of individuals and of specific usefulness to recipients who valued this sort of analysis:

"…the use of psychometrics in the right situation, -specifically to help individuals understand themselves and to raise self-awareness are very useful... and that can be anything from FIRO-B Elements, MBTI, Hogan, SDI, whatever you want to use ... there's something around using something that's based in theory and data and science to give an individual an objective view of how they behave and how they are as leaders I think is useful." C5 describing the perceived objectivity of psychometric instruments.

However, while psychometrics instruments were seen as valuable to the coaching process, the coaches also alluded to the general mistrust of such instruments and noted the difficulties this introduced into the coaching conversation:

"He was a little bit cynical, but then, people are. And it was like, 'Oh, you know, you're showing me a model'. And, and I said to him, 'Just go with me on this. And let's just see. And I suppose what I pointed out was, I think when you're using that model it's really good to help people understand what they are. In terms of, and I'm not talking about putting in people in boxes, 'cos I actually hate it, but some of the things that they may discover where they may sit." C1-3, describing an adverse reaction to the use of Personality styles.

Notably, Coach 6 reported finding strengths-based tools more palatable to recipients, avoiding the problems of perceived psychological 'pigeon-holing' However, she was concerned that such tools might by unduly one-sided and fail to address development issues:

> *"So, we then did the Strengthsfinder on her; and I think because it was only talking about strengths which, in my personal view, wasn't getting rid of the problem and the challenge we had."* C6 describing limits of using a strengths-based instrument.

A final further minority concern was the potential for recipients to misconstrue the results of psychometrics. C6, for example, reported the consternation of one recipient in response to his FIRO-B profile, who construed it as potentially limiting his effectiveness as a leader and negatively constraining his career progression in the organisation:

> *"Oh, it wasn't a concern about the FIRO report. It was more an observation that because he had really low connection, connectivity scores, both expressed and wanted, that actually if he was going to be a leader that he felt the expectation of the business was that you were network city, party city. You had to do all this going out, having a beer, you know? That side of it, and he was just saying 'That's just not me. It's not my style. I find that really hard and disingenuous. Is that going to hinder me being a leader? The fact that I don't have this, this big need for connectivity?'. So, it wasn't he was dismissing the results. I think it was more about his assumptions that he'd made around expectations of the business for a leader."* C6-1, coaching describing a recipient's concerned response to psychometric feedback.

Presenting the feedback

While the format of chosen instruments often prescribed the content of feedback, the coach participants had clear opinions on how feedback should be delivered to participants. While all the coaches interviewed expressed the necessity of honest and direct feedback provision, all recognised that they imposed boundaries on themselves, filtering or modifying the feedback to some extent. Reasons for filtering included the following:

- Being objective/ data-driven
- Adding value
- Avoiding damaging the working relationship
- Avoiding harming the recipient
- Being 'balanced'.

- *Being objective/ data-driven.* As with the HR interviewees, the coaches stressed the importance of giving evidenced feedback and were keen to avoid transmitting gossip or hearsay. So, for example, C5 described disregarding anything he might have heard outside the bounds of contracted conversations:

  "So, I think giving feedback that's through hearsay, that you pick up somewhere else that hasn't been verified, that isn't specific, I don't think should come into the conversation. So if I go back to the example with the banking client, that I had [data collection]interviews, and therefore had verbatim data that I had been invited to bring into the conversation, right? if I heard something, you know, in the hallway or something, I wouldn't- I don't think that's appropriate." C5 describing valid and invalid sources of feedback

  The metaphor of 'holding up the mirror' was frequently used to describe the stance of an objective, detached observer relaying factual data without distortion or contamination by personal agenda. However, some coaches seemed aware of the possibility of distorting this 'mirror' and, C2 (the most experienced coach), challenged whether it was possible to remain entirely detached when giving feedback and the possibility of personal needs/ agendas intruding:

"Now, if I'm personally working with something, like I had a client the other day, and, boy, I gave him some feedback. You know? I went for it, right? And, and my guess is that's the last thing he needed, but I needed to tell him. (laughs) You know? It was my need, not his need, and I was actually very aware of that at the time. C2 describing giving feedback from own rather than client need.

- *Adding value.* A prime test applied by coaches was whether feedback added 'value' to the recipient or not. While not explicitly defined, coaches saw 'adding value' as anything contributing to the development of the leaders in some way, or as critical to their future progress:

"I know in my gut I would only withhold feedback if I thought it would ... If it's not relevant, and if it's more my agenda ... And I think, I think, I think if it's more my agenda, then I have to be cautious about that. And, and does it really matter? That piece of feedback. Is it going to be critical to this person moving forward? And if it was critical, I wouldn't withhold it. But if it wasn't critical, you know, I would just ... I would - I know it'd be more mean, so, is it relevant, probably not. And will it damage the relationship? It probably would. " C1 describing personal criteria for withholding feedback

Coaches would therefore withhold some points of feedback if they judged them as unhelpful, irrelevant or misleading.

- *Avoiding damaging the working relationship.* As the above quote also illustrates, the coaches were also aware of the potential risk of giving challenging feedback and the damage this might do to working relationship. This perceived risk caused some coaches to delay giving some feedback until they felt the relationship was strong enough, or sometimes soften it or even withhold it altogether. C4 was particularly cautious in this regard and would signal to his client that he was 'using up a life' in advance of giving critical 'in the moment' feedback. However, at the other extreme, C3 and C5 were far less tentative about giving challenging feedback irrespective of the impact on the relationship:

  "I might've held onto the feedback and brought it into another session. But no. I never shied away from (laughs) from telling people what they needed to hear. (laughs)" C5 describing personal boundaries regarding feedback giving

- *Avoiding harm to the recipient.* Some of the coaches seemed especially conscious of the potential to harm when giving feedback, and the possibility of damaging, hurting, shaming or bullying the recipient. Consequently, there were several examples cited of withholding potentially hurtful feedback, and of avoiding giving feedback when the recipient was not judged as in a robust emotional state. C2, in particular, appeared very sensitive to this possibility and was keen to ensure her feedback was in service of the recipient, compassionate and well-timed:

  "I mean, we can be giving feedback with all the righteous ideas, but I just go hang on, hang on, hang on. You know, I also think too much feedback is coming from a particular mental model that loses what's in it for the other person. And the 'what's in it for the

other person' that really matters. And you give them a break. And I, I think we're, we're being cruel. Right?" C2 describing personal criteria for withholding feedback.

- *Being 'balanced'.* While some reported neutrally presenting the data, other coaches described trying to ensure recipients looked at the data in a 'balanced' way. 'Balance' was used in two senses in this context, as either ensuring that critical feedback was not disregarded without due and full consideration or that negatives were not dwelt upon disproportionately or positives unduly ignored :

  "And I think the other role of the coach I think sometimes is to make sure that the, and the individuals obtain balanced feedback and don't get themselves onto a negative …is to force them to have a balanced view of whatever feedback they're receiving from a 360 or from a recalled conversation or a series of events or from me even." C4 describing 'balancing' feedback

Facilitating recognition and recipient sense-making

Beyond initially giving the feedback, the coaches reported the challenges of helping the recipients to recognise, interrogate and make sense of the data. The coaches appeared to take a range of approaches to this, varying in the degree to which they facilitated the recipients' sense-making or were more active in providing interpretations for them:

> *"And I had a guy today, you know, he'd got 1s from one member of staff. And he had 4s and 5s from everybody else so, you know, he's saying, 'Well, what's the, what's the feedback in it for me?' And my question to him was, 'What's that person potentially needing from you?' "* C2, facilitating sense-making from 360/multi-rater data

"... And then, when we started to unpick the opportunities within it, and specifically going back to FIRO and think about connection. I said, 'Look', I said, 'You have no need to create a connection, right?' I said, 'That's obvious', and she goes, 'Yes, that's true'." C5 explaining recipient behaviours in terms of FIRO-B psychometric

It was apparent that the coaches actively looked for potential connections between different sources of data from which they inferred patterns of behaviour. Thus, for example, elements of a 360º/ multi-rater assessment were often linked to the results of a psychometric, along with their observations to provide tentative explanations of the recipient's behaviours. Thus, for example, C5 used several sources of feedback to create a speculative interpretation of the client:

"So, I gave her the feedback. I said, 'Look, there's three traits that are coming through'. And I said, 'The first one I think you'll recognise, which is, your level of intelligence and your ability to assimilate and understand complex information and get your answer ... you do it much more quickly than everybody else. And I suspect you find yourself waiting for people to catch up'. She said, 'Yup, yeah, absolutely' and I said, 'And the second part of that is, whilst you're waiting for people to catch up, I suspect you come across, and you look a bit impatient'. And she said, "Is this because I don't smile?" I said, "Well ... part of it could be the fact that you don't smile a lot." C5-1, giving feedback using personal experience, 360º/ multi-rater feedback and a psychometric profile

It also appeared that some coaches went beyond tentative hypothesising into the territory of diagnosis, i.e. providing definitive explanations and categorisations. This was particularly noticeable in the accounts of the less experienced coaches, and when psychometric instruments were deployed. Such diagnoses were then used as a basis to discuss potential coping strategies to the recipient's challenges and agree on changes in behaviour :

> *"You could tell he was quite an introverted character because he had really low connection scores. And that was really bothering him, but when we did the one-to-one feedback with the, the 360 and the, the FIRO-… we really talked about what that meant for him, particularly in the role, and you know, he was going to networking events and trying to be the life and soul and constantly going out and partying, and he said, 'I was just exhausted, and I stopped enjoying it'. And we talked about how, how he gets that balance. If you know you need to do it for a few days, the day before have a quiet day and the day after, and re-energize and, and start just saying to people that's what you need. It's okay to do that."* C6-1, explaining the implications of a psychometric assessment.

However, some coaches (particularly C2 and C4) appeared to take a far less interventionist approach, focussing instead on the recipient's emotional response to the feedback. C2, in particular, was alert to any degree of emotional distress and gave the recipient 'space' to talk through their reactions and make sense of the feedback for themselves.

> *" I was not conscious of my own space. But I just knew I'd just sat in care for her. So, I certainly wasn't thinking other thoughts. I was really just happy to hold a space for her without demand of a response. Sort of just to catch her as she came out. And so, you know, I just remember sitting quite still and just holding it and deliberately looking at whatever she said didn't ... Everything was okay, whatever she said, you know? Um, and I think I just listened, and I just let her talk it by just sitting there and*

listening. So, I, I don't think I said anything for quite a while and, you know, at some point she spoke, and she just started thinking about it. " C2 describing creating space for the recipient to process difficult feedback.

Challenging the recipient

In addition to facilitating sense-making or explaining the data, the coaches used feedback to actively confront and challenge the recipient's assumptions, behaviours or motivations. Feedback was therefore inextricably linked with the notion of challenge, and seen as a critical element in facilitating change:

> *"You know, there's always a feedback in amongst a challenge for me, I guess. Um, and, you know, I just often get the 'Oh, you've just hit the nail on the head, and they'll just look at me going, 'That's it. Oh, oh'."* C2 describing the relationship between feedback and challenge

Coaches also used challenge as a means to motivate the client to care about the feedback by pointing out the potential (negative) consequences of continued (poor) behaviours on others, their reputation or prospects:

> *"And so, part of the challenge I gave - I said to her, 'You know, you're not going to be able to progress as quickly through [Company] if you're not able to create these connections. She said, 'I don't need the connections'. I said, 'I understand that if you're making that choice, at some point you're going to hit a ceiling in your career where you can't move forward … if you can't create that connection to people, it's going really hold you back'. And it just fell on deaf ears."* C5 explaining the potential

negative consequence of not addressing the implications of a low FIRO-B connection score

While this form of challenge appeared to be very effective on some occasions, on other occasions, the challenges appeared not well received and resulted in some coaching relationships ending prematurely:

> *"So, I challenged him on his notion that he has no empathy ... And I go, 'Why is it such a badge of honour to have no empathy at work? Why is that such a point of pride for you? How is that serving your organisation? How is it not serving it? How are you creating conflict among your leaders?' And I was able to say, 'These are the three [direct reports] wanting attention from you. They want daddy's attention, you are daddy. So how, how is it that you're creating this conflict and thriving on it and the attention you get?'. He didn't have much response! He was like, 'I don't think…' it was just, he was very unwilling to look in the mirror. So yeah. That was our last session! (laughs)."* C3 describing the premature ending of a coaching relationship after challenging the recipient.

Facilitating action planning and following up on changes made

Lastly, to varying degrees, the coaches stressed the need to facilitate action planning to address issues raised by the feedback. C3, in particular, saw it as irresponsible not to provide a practical way forward, even to the extent of providing advice on how to do this:

> *"Cause if, if you don't give people actionable feedback, which I call feed forward, what happened in the past is the past. How do we change this behaviour from here to*

the next and what's your part in doing that? So, feeding people forward is better than looking at feedback because they can't change the past. That's who they were, it's not who they always have to be" C3 describing the need for action planning following feedback.

The coaches then followed up these actions at subsequent meetings, and there were several examples of the recipient then seeking further feedback on how successful they had been in making changes to their behaviours and routines:

"But interestingly enough, the first time she demonstrated the new behaviour, and how she changed it, she asked me for my feedback on it, and how the impact was. So, she's kind of following up with it. And she said, 'How do you think today went? How could it be different?'. I said, 'I thought it was really, really good, I thought actually, you did really quite a good job and it was something that, you know ... got into your place, I think you're more comfortable '. So, it was quite good because she actually came back and solicited the feedback." C5, describing the client seeking further feedback after making changes.

However, other coaches appeared less action-oriented, maintaining that when feedback had really 'landed', old patterns of behaviour were broken, and that change became driven by the coachee. Emphasis on action planning and follow-up were, therefore, perceived as unnecessary.

"She said, 'That was really definitive for me'. It was, it almost felt spiritual after it in a way, right? And you could see it shifting in her. You can see the pattern being

broken and you could see she's getting a lot more, settled around certain relationships not only in her own life but also working better in the workplace. And she's certainly going from strength to strength, yeah." C2-1, describing her 'in the moment' feedback 'landing' with the recipient.

6.4 Provider sense-making – external coaches

In addition to describing ways of working, coaches were asked to articulate what factors lead to acceptance or rejection of their feedback. While valence was seen as an important determinant of feedback response, the coaches also speculated on a wide variety of other ideas. I have categorised these into the following three areas:

- Process factors – characteristics of how they had delivered the feedback
- Recipient factors – characteristics of the recipient which influenced their receptivity to feedback and how they interpreted the feedback message
- Relationship factors – characteristics of the working relationships between coach and client and the context within which this was set.

6.4.1 Factors perceived as influencing feedback acceptance

Process factors for feedback acceptance

As with HR participants, success was attributed to how they had delivered the feedback. The interviewees all had definite opinions on how feedback should be given, and while there were many points of commonality, there were also some significant differences. As many of these points have been described above in section 6.3, these will not be repeated in detail. Factors mentioned included:

- Being honest

- Being objective and data-driven
- Being balanced vs direct
- Adding value to the client's presenting agenda
- Avoiding damaging the working relationship
- Avoiding harming the recipient

The first three of these points were broadly similar to points raised by the HR participants. However, the coaches appeared to be more concerned with providing 'value'. They also seemed more sensitised to the potential for doing harm, either to the coaching relationship or to the recipient's self-esteem. This finding is perhaps unsurprising, given the coaches were in a commercial 'triangular' relationship between themselves, the coachee/recipient and the organisation.

Recipient factors for feedback acceptance

As with the HR participants, many of the coaches attributed the feedback response to the personal characteristics of the recipient, particularly how receptive they perceived them to be. The coaches also used the term 'openness', variously describing an 'ideal' recipient as engaged with their learning, ambitious, keen to improve and able to self-reflect. 'Openness' was also associated with higher levels of self-awareness, feedback-seeking and non-resistant behaviours.

> *"She's the most open to learning. She just, she - she wants to, she's really ambitious. She's very good at what she does, but she's quite new in what she does. So, she, um, she wants to be the very best at what she does at the moment. So, with that, that's where the pleasure is. Because she, she just wants to ... Learn as much as possible and be as good as she can be."* C1 describing an 'open' feedback recipient.

Several of the coaches described such individuals as 'coachable' and explained how they vetted prospective clients for their level of motivation and commitment to being coached.

> *"So, we have the phone call to see 'Is she coachable?' ... They have to be invested in their personal growth. So, after a few hiccups, I explored that and so now when I first meet with a client I'm like, 'Are you committed to the process?'. "* C3 describing her vetting process to establish the level of client motivation.

A motivation to care about coaching and any feedback given in the process was, therefore, seen as a key ingredient contributing to feedback acceptance. Two of the coaches also noted that a degree of personal volition was essential, with coaching clients much more likely to accept feedback they had sought for themselves.

> *"And I guess the other belief is that it seems to make a difference when they've initiated it versus it's come their way. So, if they've initiated it, ... I think that's a world of difference than when it comes from an annual process. A 360, that feels like somebody else has initiated it. So, I do think that feedback is very, very different when it's been requested as opposed to just sprung on them, yeah."* C4 describing feedback seeking as determining likely acceptance.

Relationship factors for feedback acceptance

As noted above, coaches saw the quality of relationship as critical to the likely success of a coaching engagement, and as a determinant of feedback receptivity. In part, the quality of the relationship was seen as within their gift, i.e. they could influence the quality of relationship through their actions. However, some also recognised that the quality of the relationship was also partly a function of context, seeing developmental coaching contracts (i.e. non-remedial) as more likely to succeed and as more fertile ground for delivering feedback.

6.4.2 Factors perceived as influencing feedback rejection.

In general, coach participants largely attributed feedback rejection to either recipient characteristics or the lack of relationship between them. Process deficiencies were rarely mentioned, and unlike the HR participants, none of the coach participants articulated concerns about lack of personal skill in this area. However, it is worth noting that in one of the incidents, C1 described having to rethink her approach, rather than necessarily attributing rejection to the recipient:

> *"It didn't work on that day. I went away and I had to rethink me. Uh, and think, how am I going to engage with this person*?" C1-3, C3 reflecting on how to change her approach

Recipient factors for feedback rejection

As with the HR participants, the coach participants felt that 'closed' recipients were the prime reason for lack of feedback receptivity. 'Closed' was variously described by the coaches as someone who was 'uncoachable', disinterested in learning, arrogant, cynical or unwilling to change or to be challenged. While a majority view was that such recipients lacked self-awareness, C5 challenged this notion citing the example of one recipient who appeared to be very aware of his negative impact on others:

> *"So… you could have stopped him and said give me 500 words on why you operate the way you do and how you operate and why you operate that way, I think you would*

> *have gotten a pretty impressive diatribe. So bizarrely, I would have said that he was self-aware. And it's interesting to think, isn't it, that, if someone's invested though in a self-image that that might mean they're non-receptive."* C5 describing a non-receptive recipient.

Other explanations for feedback rejection included the recipient's age, outdated or fixed attitudes, lack of learning orientation, inflated ego, or as the consequence of a dysfunctional psychological history.

> *"If I'm being honest, the actual problems were never being dealt with. I actually really think this lady needed counselling because I'd gone down some conversations; and again, some things had come out about what'd gone on in the past and her behaviour. All these panic attacks and-and things like that. Um, there was clearly something quite deep-rooted here"* C6 attributing lack of feedback receptivity to psychological history.

There was also a common tendency to attribute 'closedness' as a fixed personality type, i.e. as a permanent attribute of the individual. However, C2 challenged the notion of a binary 'open/closed' division of humanity, believing response to feedback was also dependent on the situation and personal meaning-making.

> *"So, yeah I think it's a very complex space in life. Um, because we're not always that open. We can say we always want to improve but, ah, you know, sometimes there's stuff happening in their head that it doesn't work."* C2 challenging open/closed division

A final type of explanation related to the extent to which the recipient was able to hear and mentally process feedback. Thus, for example, C3 described some clients as being emotionally overwhelmed by their personal circumstances and deferring the start of coaching and her usual assessment processes until the recipients were in a position to cope.

> *"And there's a lot of women, especially in their thirties that I've worked with, who just they're in that overwhelmed cycle of life where they're not sure if this is what they signed up for. They're exhausted. And they're getting hit by all sides, you know. My boss says, 'I'm not doing enough'. My husband says, 'I'm not doing enough'. Um I'm, I feel like I'm failing my kid. You know it's just the, the overwhelm*." C3 describing deferring coaching and feedback with overwhelmed clients.

Relationship factors for feedback rejection

While the quality of the relationship was cited as a key determinant of feedback acceptance, it was also cited as a prime reason for feedback rejection. As has been noted above, the coaches felt that remedial coaching relationships hampered likely feedback acceptance, as well as hindering the coaching in general. Coaches recognised that coachees/recipients were often in the coaching relationship under sufferance and consequently saw their commitment to development as low or non-existent. Further, some coaches noted that feedback provision in these sorts of relationships was experienced as a coercive assertion of power, with the coach perceived by recipients as an agent of formal power structures of the organisation.

> *"And I think I was in a position to do that [give feedback] because I was external and I still had a bit of a power base with the General Manager - , who's by the way leaving at this point. So that I knew that was not going to be long lived. And that I*

wouldn't put it past this guy to go, 'Yeah, yeah, come back next month and we'll see what's happened to, to the balance of power around here." C4 describing lack of commitment in coachee/recipient.

6.5 Analysis and interpretation

The following section presents an analysis and personal interpretation of the data summarised in sections 6.1-6.4 above, to explicate further the coaches' experience of providing feedback, and the perceived processes and conditions involved in facilitation acceptance and change. Initial points of comparison with the HR participants are made throughout, highlighting areas of similarity and difference.

6.5.1 Coach provider's experience of feedback

In many ways, the coaches' experience of providing feedback appeared to mirror that of the HR participants, both sharing a clear preference for giving positive, affirmative feedback rather than negative, critical feedback, and for working with clients who accepted their feedback rather than rejected it. However, while most coaches found the latter an uncomfortable and worrisome experience at times, they all saw feedback provision as essential to leader development and a critical component of coaching engagements.

As noted in section 6.1.1 above, while most had received some training in providing feedback, this did not appear adequate to equip them for the full range of possible recipient responses or help them to process their reactions to this. None of the coaches mentioned taking difficulties associated with feedback provision to a coaching supervisor; however, as use of supervision was not an explicit focus of the interviews, this might not have been reported. Only one coach reported changing their approach in the face of sustained resistance, and it was more usual to attribute recipient reluctance to their personal characteristics, rather than their approach, the quality of the relationship or the broader context of the work.

As with the HR participants, the coaches espoused clear developmental intentions, as well as a non-directive stance to coaching. However, many found themselves in remedial rather than developmental relationships, and some appeared to see this as a license to give forthright opinion, direct advice, or diagnostic interpretations of their behaviours. This was justified by narratives of the 'toxic' and 'unaware' leader, and it was not unusual for comments to be made about how leaders lacked emotional intelligence. However, some coaches described showing considerable sympathy and compassion for recipients, even siding with their perspectives over others. This would suggest that the 'triangular' nature of many coaching assignments sets up difficulties of conflicting loyalties, which can impact the nature of feedback given.

While most coaches espoused ‘objectivity’ in their feedback provision, there appeared to be greater recognition that their objectivity was partial, with the possibility that their personal needs or the organisational agenda might intrude. In general, the coaches appeared to feel legitimised by their expertise in psychometrics instruments (and other tools), believing they brought objective insights and perspectives that would otherwise be inaccessible. However, there was a recognition that such instruments could be unpalatable to recipients at times.

As with the HR participants, a feedback ‘escalation’ process appeared to be in operation (see Figure 5-3), with the coaches being contracted to handle the more intractable or extreme cases. This might imply that external coaches are more likely to be asked to deal with more resistant individuals or individuals who are highly aware of previous criticism. This situation potentially casts the external coach in an awkward 'trouble shooter/expert' role, legitimised by the commissioning organisation rather than the individual's development agenda, and enabled by the use of specialist instruments. However, while such issues of power were present in the interviews, this was not an issue that was explicitly surfaced by participants.

6.5.2 Facilitating acceptance and change

Section 6.3 above summarised the methods and processes described by the coach participants to deliver feedback and facilitate acceptance and change. Figure 6-1 below summarises these in the form of a process flow diagram. While these methods and processes were broadly similar to those reported by the HR participants (see Figure 5-4), there were also some significant differences and additions.

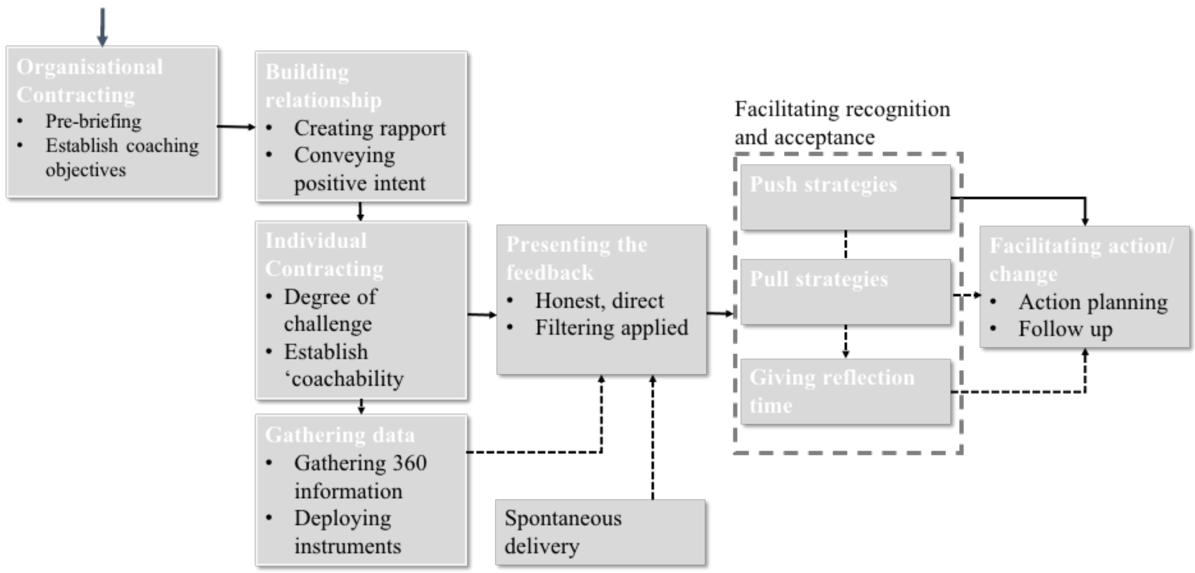

Figure 6-1: Feedback provision process - Coach participants perspective

As noted, the initial trigger for coaching came from either an identified remedial need or as part of a planned developmental intervention. Some form of 'pre-wiring' of the coach was therefore common and along with the framing of the coaching relationship within agreed organisational coaching objectives. In comparison to the HR participants, the coaches placed much greater stress on creating and building a working relationship and particularly in contracting the work. Contracting included establishing the degree of feedback and challenge a client was willing to tolerate, as well as assessing their likely ‘coachability’. A far greater reliance was also placed on the use of assessments and psychometrics, especially in the initial sessions, with more spontaneous feedback from personal experience and observations of the client reserved for the later stages of the relationship. There was also more emphasis on the use of strengths-based feedback by some coaches, rather than the more typical deficit-based feedback of the HR participants. However, some coach participants conveyed a sense that their clients had little real choice in whether they used psychometric instruments or not, and it could be argued that these were used as much for the coaches benefit as the clients on some occasions.

As with the HR participants, the coaches deployed a variety of methods to facilitate recognition and acceptance, which again can be broadly grouped into ‘push’ and ‘pull’ strategies (see Figure 6-2 below). Overall, as with the HR participants, ‘push’ styles appeared to have been attempted first, before falling back onto ‘pull’ styles. However, it is worth noting that some coaches showed a more evident preference for ‘push’ strategies (e.g. C3), while others operated more clearly in the ‘pull’ mode (e.g. C2). This difference was also carried through into the action planning phase with 'push' style coaches emphasising the need to create action plans with clients and monitor their subsequent implementation. In contrast 'pull' style coaches appeared more content to leave this in the hands of the client.

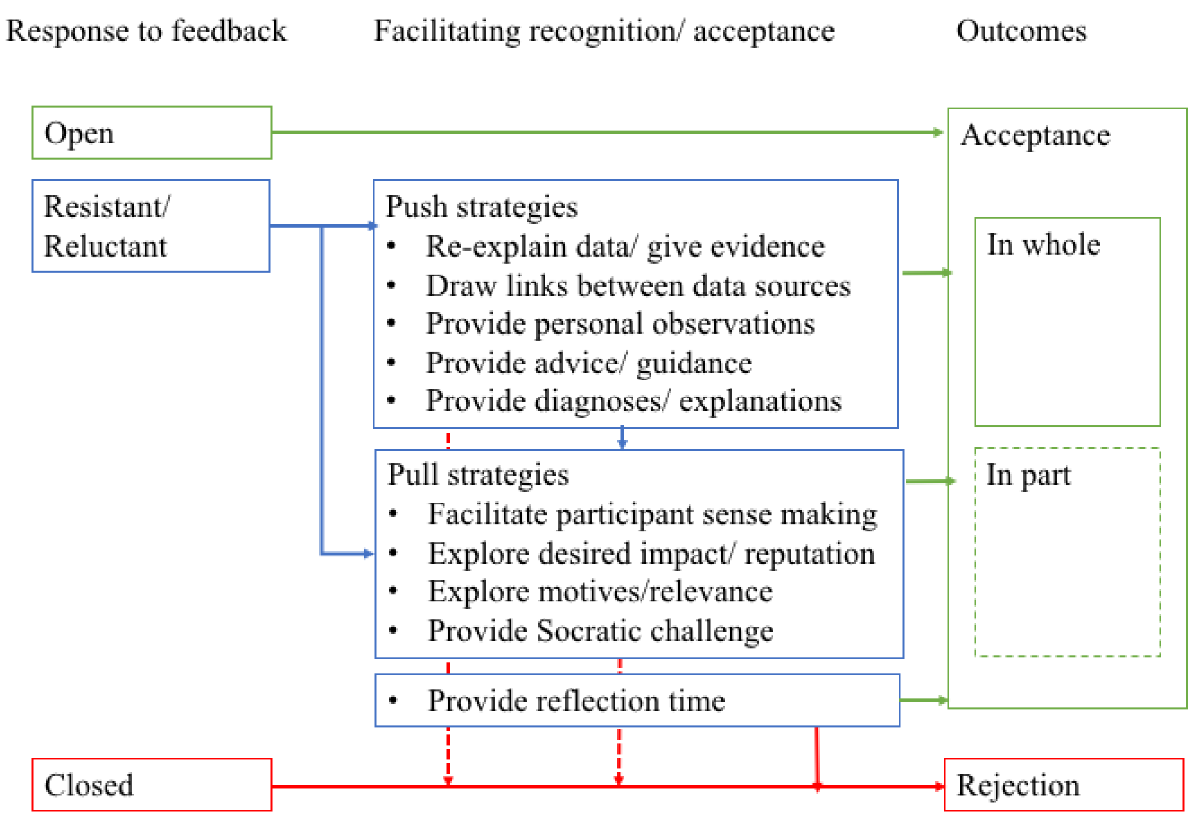

Figure 6-2: Facilitating feedback recognition and acceptance - coach participant perspective

Informing their ways of working, the coaches appeared well versed in different feedback delivery models. However as with the HR participants, the coach participants did not articulate any particular explicit theoretical stance as guiding their practice, but references to concepts such as Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1998a, 1998b; Goleman et al., 2002), the Johari Window (Luft, 1961, 1969) and Positive Psychology (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) were present. It appeared that the dominant theoretical stance for both coaches and HR professionals was largely objectivist and behaviourist, with the feedback being used to modify or mitigate socially problematic behaviours. Feedback was therefore primarily seen as an external objective 'truth', with coach cast in the role of message deliverer on the behalf of others.

However, there were significant exceptions to this, a few coaches appearing to take a more constructivist stance in that they emphasised and supported the client's sense-making over the delivery of a message on behalf of others. For example, C2, the most experienced coach, appeared to focus on supporting her client to interrogate and make personal sense of received feedback, rather than persuading them of its validity or 'truth'. She was also apparently highly attuned to the (negative) emotional impact and effects of feedback and the need to provide space and emotional safety. This stance did not prevent her from offering her own observations 'in the moment', but she appeared to do so in a way that was more tentative and exploratory. It was also noticeable that she saw the recipient's sense-making of feedback as an evolving process over time, as opposed to a one-off event.

6.5.3 Perceived reasons for feedback response.

Section 6.4 above described the conditions that coach participants reported as necessary for feedback acceptance, or for avoiding feedback rejection. Table 6-3 below consolidates this material, using the same categorisation of factors as in Chapter 4 to facilitate comparisons. This shows the complexity of similar interrelated factors as in previous chapters.

Table 6-3: The reasons given for feedback acceptance/rejection – Coach participants

	Input factors	Relational factors	Process factors	Recipient factors	Provider factors	Contextual factors
Coach providers	**Credible data** – not hearsay, evidenced, objective, use of tools	**Trusting of relationship** – Remedial vs Developmental relationship Degree of client volition Providing psychological safety. Tools as the basis of expertise/ power	**Contract for feedback -** degree of challenge permissible **Constructive delivery** – honest, objective/ data-driven, adding value, avoiding damage to client/ relationship **Balance vs Direct* **Influence approach** – push vs pull. Directive vs non-directive stance. Use of reflective space	**Receptivity to feedback** -Open vs closed personality, general coachability, recipient motivation to care about feedback. Being under duress to improve	**Attitudes to feedback provision** – own motives and confidence, confidence, attitudes to conflict, Source of legitimisation, perceived role, use of referent/ expert power **Attitudes to feedback recipient(s)** – perceived coachability, the impact of negative prewiring, empathy for the recipient, the balance of loyalties	**Perception of feedback culture** – expectations of coach role, beliefs regarding study organisation's feedback culture.

[Key: *Text in italics represents disputed perspectives*

As with the HR participants, coach participants largely attributed outcomes to i) recipient factors, ii) relationship factors and iii) process factors. Most coaches described recipients as either 'open' or 'closed', and there was considerable consensus overall in how these terms were used. A lack of receptivity to feedback was seen as the prime reason for feedback rejection, as well as indicating a lack of engagement with coaching. This might suggest a similar form of attribution bias in feedback providers, seeing success coming from their actions and failure from the qualities of feedback recipients.

However, in comparison to the HR participants, coach interviewees gave more recognition to how their own motives and influence style shaped the dialogue with recipients. Some also appeared to use a greater range of influence tactics, particularly ‘pull’ styles. Emphasis was placed on the importance of a trusting working relationship as a necessary precondition, with particular attention placed on relationship building and contracting with recipients. Coaches also appeared more cognisant of the detrimental impact of a remedial contract on outcomes, and the impact of ‘pre-wiring’ before meeting a client on the working relationship. Particular value was placed, by most, on use of psychometric instruments and other personality assessments, both as a source of expertise and as a basis for legitimising their work.

Similarities and differences in the conditions impacting feedback outcomes, as expressed by provider and recipient groups, will be further explored in Chapter 7: Comparisons.

Chapter 7: Comparison of findings

So far, the discussion of findings has been limited to analysis within participant groups. In this chapter, the analysis is extended to compare findings, firstly, across both provider groups (section 7.1) and secondly, across all participants (section 7.2). Initial conceptualisations of different aspects of the findings are offered to distil the complexity of information and discussed in relation to existing relevant literature. An extended discussion of all findings follows in Chapter 8.

7.1 Comparisons across provider groups

Section 6.5 above presented some initial points of comparisons between the HR and the coach provider groups regarding their experiences of feedback provision, their reported processes of facilitating acceptance and change and the reasons they perceived for particular feedback responses. This section extends this comparison process, looking specifically at firstly, differences and similarity in reported ways of working between providers and proposing a stage model of feedback provision based on the combined methods of both groups (section 7.1.1). Secondly, this section compares differences in provider approaches to giving feedback, proposing a categorisation of provider stances (section 7.1.2).

7.1.1 Provider ways of working

Chapters 5 and 6 summarised the reported methods of working by the HR and Coach participants, indicating the stages they saw as involved in the feedback process. Figure 7-1 below presents a consolidation of their perspectives as a stage model of feedback giving in a leadership development context.

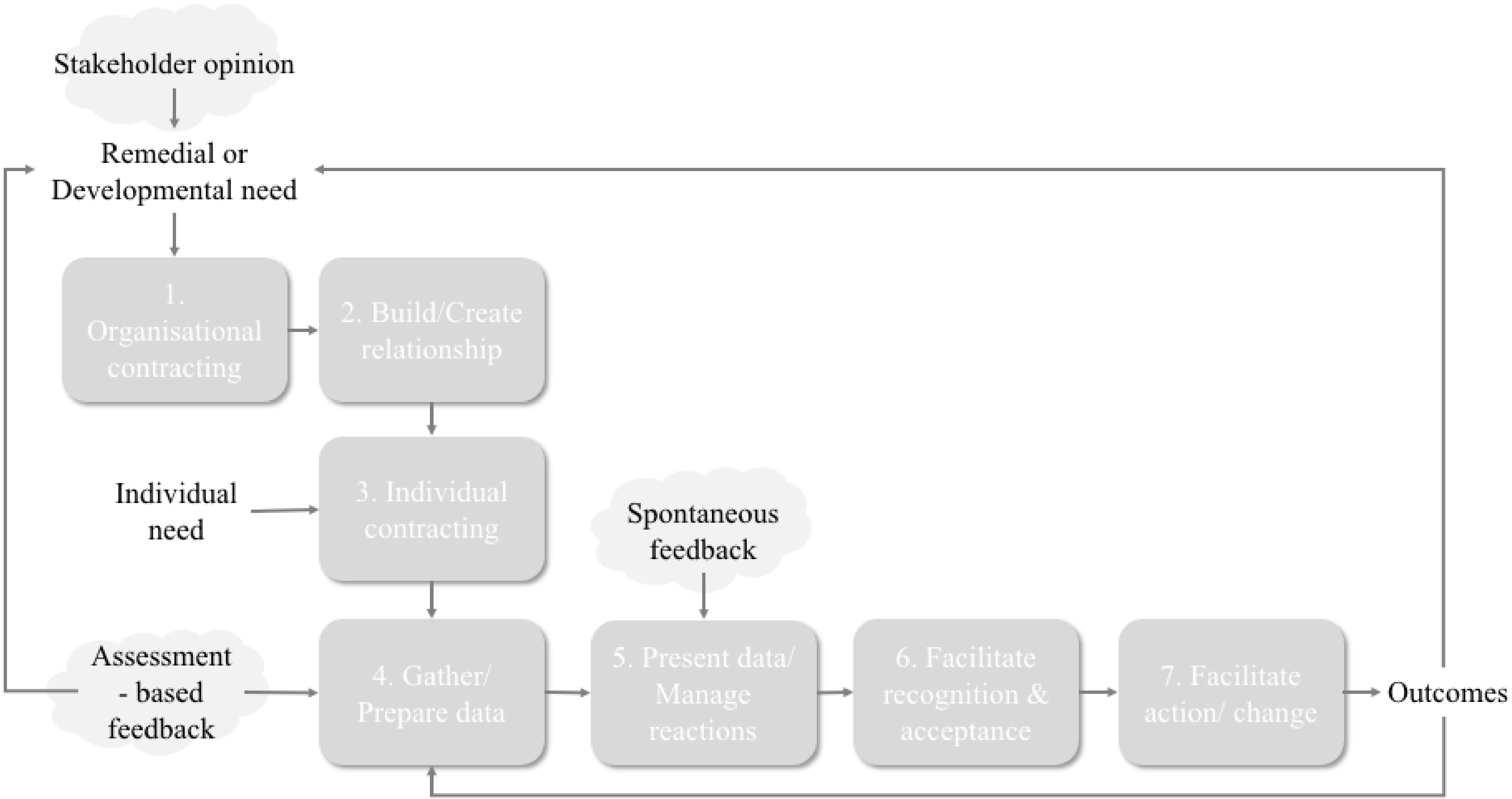

Figure 7-1: Consolidated stage model of giving feedback - all provider participants

This model suggests that the feedback process can be initiated from a remedial or developmental need, often informed by stakeholder opinion (e.g. individual's line manager) or previous rounds of feedback.

Stage 1 of the process, organisational contracting, represents a discussion and negotiation between feedback provider and organisational stakeholders (e.g. HR or line manager) where the remit and desired outcomes are either explicitly or implicitly stated. This stage might also include the stipulation of the methods to be used (e.g. choice of psychometrics assessments, use of 360/multi-rater assessment) and a background briefing on the individual. Stages 2, 3 and 4 represent preparation stages where the provider meets the recipient to create/build the relationship, agree on an individual contract and begin the process of collecting data on the individual if not already available.

Stages 5 and 6 represent the heart of the feedback giving process – the dyadic conversation. At stage 5, data is shared with recipients, and affective reaction managed appropriately. The provider may also choose to share any observations they have witnessed in the course of working with them. At Stage 6 the feedback provider facilitates a discussion of the available data, to help the recipient to i) recognise the data as credible, and ii) accept the data as of sufficient importance to warrant action. A variety of directive ('push') and non-directive ('pull') influence tactics are available to the provider to gain buy-in from the recipient. Stages 5 and 6 represent points where the recipient may choose to reject the feedback, in whole or part, in which case the process terminates without moving to stage 7. However, if the feedback is accepted, the provider can facilitate a conversation about how best to act on it and what successful change might look like. The outcomes achieved by the recipient may precipitate further rounds of feedback-seeking or revision of the original development need.

As far as is known, this model represents a unique representation of the process of feedback giving in the context of leader development, from the combined perspective of sanctioned providers. In an under-researched area, there appear to be only two similar models, firstly, London & Smither's longitudinal performance management model (2002) and secondly a later elaboration of this, by Gregory et al. (2008), in the context of feedback used in executive coaching.

Both of these earlier models appear to be conceptually based, rather than the result of empirical research, proposing a stage process as well as speculating on mediating factors. Table 7-1 below compares the scope of these models with the above formulation, highlighting differences and similarities in perspective taking, and constituent processes. This comparison suggests that the stage model presented above is broadly consistent with these previous theoretical conceptualisations. However, the model presented represents a much more detailed and nuanced elaboration of the feedback giving process, informed from the perspective of providers. Unlike previous conceptualisations, the model suggests that feedback may be instigated by organisational/ stakeholder needs as well as individual needs and can take the form of planned assessment as well as spontaneous comment. So conceived, feedback provision serves individual and organisational needs and is contracted by the provider at both these levels. Feedback provision is also seen as an iterative process, with individual feedback exchanges influenced by earlier conversations, and shaping subsequent exchanges.

Table 7-1: Comparison of stage models of feedback provision

		London & Smither (2002)	Gregory et al (2008)	Maxwell (2020)
Scope of the model		Cyclical 3 stage process model of receiving feedback	Cyclical 5 stage process model of feedback within executive coaching	Cyclical 7 stage process model of giving feedback to leaders
Perspective		Longitudinal performance management	Interaction of coach and coachee	Provider perceptions of feedback giving process
Process	**Initiation**	0. Critical event that causes re-evaluation by individual	1. Catalyst for coaching – critical event.	0. Remedial or developmental need
	Preparation		2. Establishing the relationship 3. Data Gathering	1. Organisational contracting 2. Build/create the relationship 3. Individual contracting 4. Gathering data/ preparing to give feedback
	Delivery	1. Recipient anticipation and initial reaction 2. Processing feedback mindfully	4. Utilizing feedback	5 Presenting the feedback/ Managing recipient affective reactions 6 Facilitating recognition and acceptance
	Consequences	3. Using feedback to set goals/ track progress	5. Outcomes	7 Facilitating action/ change (leading to outcomes, and further feedback)

7.1.2 Provider 'stance'.

To date, the literature has paid scant attention to the role and influence of the feedback provider in feedback conversations, although research and discussion have noted the impact of coach characteristics in coaching relationships (Bozer et al., 2013). However, the study findings suggest that the provider's 'stance' had a considerable impact on how feedback was conveyed, received and interpreted, as well as on the type of relationship between participants.

The provider interview data suggested some distinctive patterns within the participants regarding how they saw the role of the feedback provider, appropriate ways of working and general attitudes towards giving feedback to leaders. As mentioned above, there appeared to be two dominant types of influence approach deployed (i.e. 'push' vs 'pull) as well as differing relative loyalties to the organisational agenda versus individual recipient needs. Four broad patterns of provider stance were, therefore, apparent (Figure 7-2 below). Participants who demonstrated clear features of one type are given below; however, HR3 and HR6 showed aspects of more than one approach

- Forcing acceptance of feedback – HR1, C3 and C5
- Preserving self-esteem of the recipient – HR5 and C6
- Persuading acceptance of feedback – HR2, H4, C1 and C4
- Iterative exploration of meaning – C2

Figure 7-2: Conceptualised stances of feedback provision

- *Forcing acceptance.* In this first category, the providers appeared to make greater use of 'push' influence approaches and displayed greater apparent loyalty to the organisational agenda over the individual. Their approach could be characterised as a 'telling' style, with feedback given in a direct, and even sometimes forceful manner. Feedback was seen as an objective external 'truth', and feedback provision aimed to get recipients to accept the feedback and thereby correct undesirable behaviours. Such providers were willing to educate their recipients or give direct advice but appeared less interested in their perspective. They were also more likely to focus on recipient deficiencies and were more likely to provide (psychological) interpretations/diagnoses of their recipient behaviours and motives. Remedial feedback was not seen as inconsistent with a coaching relationship. Use of psychometric and other diagnostic assessments was seen as an essential part of their expertise, and tools were often selected based on provider or organisational preferences rather than the recipient's need. They drew their source of power from the organisational relationship, and some appeared comfortable in a 'one up' power relationship where the recipient was expected to be compliant in the relationship and respectful of their expertise. These providers appeared highly sensitised to any perceived client resistance and strove to 'overcome' this through force of argument or display of psychological knowledge. This group appeared most likely to blame recipient dysfunction or 'closed' personality type as reasons for feedback rejection.

- *Preserving recipient self*-esteem. In contrast to the above category, providers in this category appeared to display greater loyalty to the client agenda over that of the organisation. They, therefore, tended to give more credence to recipient's account of events and some, occasionally, disagreed with the feedback given by others. They appeared to take a more conciliatory style and were sensitised to damaging the recipient's self-esteem and confidence. Whilst convinced of the developmental value of feedback, fear of disrupting the relationship or causing offence appeared to cause them to soften critical messages on occasion. They were also sensitive to recipient resistance but appeared to have fewer strategies to deal with it. Giving negative feedback was experienced as particularly uncomfortable, and some doubted their competence when challenged. Such providers seemed to prefer to focus on recipient strengths and enjoyed using strengths-based assessment tools.

- *Persuading acceptance.* In this category, while the organisational agenda appeared the prime loyalty, the feedback providers seemed to lean toward greater use of 'selling' styles of influence in order to persuade the recipient to accept the feedback. The provider, whilst relaying the feedback, would seek through dialogue and questioning to forge connections between the data and the client's experience, in order to facilitate recognition. Recipient motivations and interests would be explored, clarified and leveraged to bring about acceptance, as would any gaps between the recipient's aspirations and reported current state. Consequences of non-conformance to organisational expectations and norms would, therefore, be explored and debated. This style of feedback was seen as congruent with a non-directive coaching style. Feedback providers in this category appeared to enjoy an equal partnership with recipients and prized high levels of recipient engagement as a means of bringing about change. Resistance to feedback was more likely to be seen as a normal part of the change process, and such providers seemed less afraid to engage with it. While psychometric tools and other assessments were offered to recipients for developmental purposes, selection of tools was more likely to be informed by an organisational need (e.g. for use on a development programme), rather than the specific needs of the individual.

- *Iterative exploration.* In this final approach to feedback provision, the feedback provider appeared to be both led by the recipient's agenda and to use non-directive facilitative approaches. Rather than aiming for recognition and acceptance, the aim of this style appeared to emphasise sense-making by the recipient, and avoidance of imposing their own interpretations. Feedback provision was seen as an iterative exploratory process rather than an event, with understanding and personal insight developing over time. The emergent and evolving fit between the environment and recipient was an explicit focus of the work. The provider encouraged the recipient to interrogate and test the feedback data whilst challenging their perspectives. There was a focus on creating a high degree of psychological safety in the relationship, and explicitly contracting for the degree of feedback and permissible challenge. Psychological tools and assessments were not seen as an essential or leading part of the work, but if deployed were used only to illuminate the client's agenda and emerging issues. Such tools were, therefore, likely to be used later in the working relationship and with the recipients' informed consent. The provider was both challenging and supportive of the recipient, calibrating their interventions with the recipient's level of distress and discomfort. Challenging 'in the moment' feedback appeared to be avoided at the initial stages of the relationship but increased in use as trust became established. Reflection was actively encouraged, and sense-making by the recipient was seen as both a product of dialogue and individual reflection. Emphasis was placed on modelling feedback receiving as a way of teaching recipients how to manage their affective reactions.

From the perspective of ethical practice, the first three of these 'stances' pose different dilemmas, as well as practical challenges as to their effectiveness:

- *Forcing acceptance* – while this stance might be seen as the most time-efficient style, it raises potential ethical issues of coercive use of (implicit) power and misuse of tools. In terms of relationship, the provider is positioned as an expert, and as more powerful than the recipient. This stance appeared to provide the least opportunity for open dialogue and to constrain meaning-making to predetermined messages. This style also appeared to engender higher levels of dissonance, and it might therefore be questioned how much it resulted in sustained change
- *Preserving self*-esteem – while this conflict-avoidant stance appeared to enable a higher degree of psychological safety, it potentially constrains the dialogue by avoiding negative messages or limiting the discussion to only positive aspects. Ethically I see the prime challenge of this approach as potential collusion, avoiding examination of information

that might cause the recipient to adjust their self-view or update their ways of engaging with others.

- Persuading acceptance'- this stance appeared to be a more collegiate, dialogic approach, and therefore with the potential to facilitate more collaborative interpretation of feedback. However, the underlying intention still appeared to be one of persuasion rather than open exploration, privileging the perspectives of others over that of the recipient. From an ethical stance, I suggest that this approach might also be construed as manipulation of conversation to predetermined outcomes, albeit through more palatable tactics.

In contrast to the above, the 'iterative exploration' approach appeared to avoid many of the potential ethical challenges outlined above, whilst facilitating learning for the recipients involved. Whilst apparently effective, it seemed to be the least direct approach, with the meaning of feedback progressively emerging and deepening over time. This approach, whilst least common among participants, is consistent with the ideas of Geirland and Maniker-Lieter (1995), who see feedback as a cyclical and dialogic process. Paradoxically, the providers appeared to have the least control over outcomes, putting their faith in recipient sense-making and reflection, rather than directing them to pre-formed conclusions. It might, therefore, be difficult for a coach using this approach to guarantee specific outcomes, as might be requested by the organisational 'client'.

7.2 Comparisons across all participant groups

This section provides a comparison of findings across the recipient and provider groups. To facilitate discussion, a similar structure is employed as in Chapters 4-6, focusing particularly on their differing experiences of feedback (section 7.2.1) and perceived reason for feedback acceptance or rejection. (section 7.2.2) Additionally, attitudes towards different forms of feedback are reported (7.2.3).

7.2.1 Comparisons of feedback experiences

In many ways, the reported experiences of giving and receiving feedback appeared to mirror each other. For example, both providers and recipients shared an espoused belief in the value of feedback as a developmental mechanism and agreed that feedback should be open, honest and constructive. They also similarly stressed the importance of a trusting relationship between recipient and provider and saw this as a necessary pre-condition and potential determinant of the outcome. Both groups showed an apprehension of negative feedback, albeit for different reasons, and an unexpected finding was the degree of apprehension and trepidation that many providers, as well as recipients, reported feeling in advance of a session likely to involve critical or negative feedback.

However, beyond these initial similarities, there were some significant differences in reported experiences. While the recipients recounted incidents of feedback that held some particular meaning for them, providers tended to focus on incidents where they had faced some significant challenge or resistance. The provider group were, therefore, much more likely to characterise their experience according to the reactions they encountered. Providers therefore classified recipients according to their response, with acceptant recipients experienced more positively, and the resistant or reluctant experienced more negatively. Unsurprisingly, none of the leader recipients characterised themselves as resistant to feedback, and all were able to give cogent explanations for accepting or rejecting particular items of feedback. Feedback rejection was therefore seen as a reasonable response to any information they saw as disingenuous, irrelevant/ illogical or as inconsistent with their self-image or personality.

These findings can be interpreted in a variety of ways and are likely to be coloured by social desirability factors. For example, it is not surprising that the leaders reported themselves as logical and rational in response to feedback, and potentially, may therefore have under-reported their (negative) affective reactions. Equally, it is not surprising that no leader interviewed described themselves as 'unaware' or 'resistant' to feedback, although providers clearly had experiences of leaders who were both.

On the provider side, attribution bias was potentially at play in that providers were more likely to attribute negative responses to recipient characteristics, rather than, for example, their lack of personal skill, choice of methods used or the broader context. Many shared the narrative of the 'unaware' and 'toxic' leader, and it was clear that many worked in remedial situations, and with recipients who had failed to respond to feedback from others. Many of the incidents recounted by these providers could therefore be seen as 'last resort' attempts by the organisation to change unacceptable behaviours. It would, therefore, not be surprising if some providers developed a jaundiced view of leadership and leadership receptivity to feedback. Equally, it would be unsurprising if leaders developed a trepidation of feedback from HR and other out-of-line providers, and the data did indeed suggest, on occasion, some suspicion of their motives and underlying intent. This finding would suggest that providers need to be particularly clear on their intent in giving feedback and explicit about the nature of the contract between parties, including confidentiality and boundary management.

As little has been written elsewhere about the experience of feedback participants, particularly the experience of recipients, relevant comparisons with the literature are difficult. However, Molaski (2006) found similar mismatches and misalignments of expectation in a qualitative study of supervisor-subordinate experiences of performance feedback.

7.2.2 Comparisons of perceived reasons for feedback outcome

Chapters 4-6 included summaries of how participants explained the reasons for feedback acceptance or rejection. Table 7-2 below further consolidates this material, using the following headings to facilitate comparisons between the recipient and provider groups:

- Input factors – reasons given relating to the credibility of the data or its source.
- Relational factors – reasons given relating to the nature of the relationship between provider and recipient, particularly the level of trust.
- Process factors – reasons given relating to how feedback was given, in particular, what was considered as constructive delivery and how feedback was contracted for
- Recipient factors –reasons given that related to characteristics of the recipient, in particular their receptivity to feedback.
- Provider factors – reasons that related to the attitudes of the feedback provider, either towards a specific recipient, or their more general attitudes to giving feedback.
- Contextual factors – reasons given that related to the broader organisational context in which the feedback incident occurred, particularly the organisational norms and expectations as well as specific practices.

Table 7-2: The reasons given for feedback acceptance/rejection - comparison of leader, HR and coach perspectives.

	Leader Recipients (L1-L12)	HR Providers (HR1-HR6)	Coach Providers (C1-C6)
Input factors	**Credible data/source** • From trusted source/ of known provenance • Unbiased, logical, evidenced, tangible, consistent with other feedback, relevant to the personal context. *Continuous vs discrete, spontaneous vs planned.*	**Credible data/source** • Not hearsay or gossip • Evidenced • Objective	**Credible data/ source** • Not hearsay or gossip, • Evidenced • Objective • Based on tools
Relational factors	**Trusting relationship** • High trust relationship (established over time) • Providing psychological safety, • Personal volition in receiving feedback	**Trusting relationship** • Unbiased, developmental intent • Trusted and respected by the recipient • Non-judgmental of recipient • Rapport established with recipient	**Trusting relationship** – • Impact of Remedial vs Developmental contract - degree of client volition/ buy-in • Providing psychological safety • Tools as basis of expertise/power
Process factors	**Constructive delivery** • Personalised to the recipient, caringly delivered, sensitive to the recipient, well-timed. • Avoids damaging the recipient or relationship • Points to practical change/action • *Honest vs Considerate*	**Constructive delivery** • Honest, evidenced, objective, *balanced vs direct* • Prepared in advance, well-timed • Gets past defences **Influence approach** • *Push' vs 'pull' approach; use of a coaching approach, the extent of filtering*	**Constructive delivery** • Honest, objective/ data-driven, adding value to recipients, *balanced* • Avoiding damage to client/ relationship **Influence approach** • *Push' vs 'pull' approach; use of a coaching approach*; use of reflective space **Contract for feedback** • Degree of challenge permissible agreed in advance

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Leader recipients</th><th>HR providers</th><th>Coach providers</th></tr>
<tr><td>Recipient factors</td><td>Evaluation of specific feedback.
• Consistency with self-beliefs/ self-image/ values/ beliefs/ logic
• Strength of affective reaction

Receptivity to feedback
• Permeability to feedback- attitude to learning and change, self-doubting vs self-certain</td><td>Receptivity to feedback
• Open vs closed person - caused by underlying personality issues, level of self-confidence and personal security. Attitudes to learning and change</td><td>Receptivity to feedback
• Open vs closed personality
• General ‘coachability’, recipient motivations to care about the feedback
• Degree of personal volition in engaging with coaching, degree of duress to improve</td></tr>
<tr><td>Provider factors</td><td>Attitude to feedback provider
• Seen as a trusted source – unbiased, no hidden agenda or bias, positive/ developmental intent, having genuine care for the recipient</td><td>Attitudes to feedback provision
• Own motives and confidence in giving feedback, attitudes to conflict
• Sources of legitimisation, perceived role, use of positional/ expert power

Attitudes to (specific) feedback recipient(s)
• Extent of prewiring by others
• Loyalty to organisation vs individual
• Extent and nature of the prior relationship</td><td>Attitudes to feedback provision
• Own motives and confidence, attitudes to conflict,
• Source of legitimisation - perceived role, use of referent/ expert power

Perception of feedback recipient(s)
• Perceived coachability
• Extent /nature of prewiring by others
• Loyalty to organisation vs individual, empathy for client, balance of loyalties.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Contextual factors</td><td>Perception of feedback culture
• Poor prior experience of the performance management process
• Perceptions of feedback-seeking,
• Critical/deficit focus</td><td>Perception of feedback culture
• Expectations of the HR role
• Beliefs re. performance management,
• Prior experience of (poor) leadership behaviours</td><td>Perception of feedback culture
• Expectations of Coach role,
• Beliefs regarding study organisation’s feedback culture.</td></tr>
</table>

[Key: *italic text = point of disagreement within participant groups]*

- *Input factors – credibility of data/ data source:*

  All the research participants wanted to ensure that feedback data was objective, logical and well-evidenced. In particular, the participant leaders were concerned about the credibility and consistency of feedback data and challenges to data provenance, reliability and validity were common in their recounted incidents. Negative feedback (unsurprisingly) appeared to be treated to particular scrutiny, especially when from an unknown or distant source. These findings are consistent with authors (Brett and Atwater, 2001; Ilgen et al., 1979) who suggest that negative feedback is likely to be seen as less valid than positive.

  In contrast, providers appeared to have a higher degree of trust in the reliability of the feedback they were giving, even when they could not personally validate it. This difference in 'stance' was most evident in accounts involving debrief of psychometric instruments, but also present with other forms of assessment-based feedback (see section 7.2.3 below). These differences between participants might explain why in many incidents the dialogue appeared to become entangled in defending and justifying the instrument or process of data collection, rather than using feedback as a point of evidence to inform development and change. It might also suggest that coaches and other providers would be wise to understand the evidential limits of the tools they use and avoid appearing to side with perspectives they are unable to evidence directly.

- *Relational factors – creating/ building a trusting relationship:*

  All three participant groups were consistent in stating that the quality of the relationship was the most important single factor in determining feedback acceptance/ rejection. This was an unexpected feature of the data but consistent with views in the coaching and counselling literature (De Haan, 2008) that stress the relational nature of the work and the importance of the working alliance.

For the leader interviewees, a trusting relationship was often equated to a close working relationship with a long-standing line manager or peer, or peer-stranger with whom a high degree of psychological safety was felt. This is consistent with findings from authors (Greller and Herold, 1975; Ilgen et al., 1979) who suggest that feedback is considered most trustworthy from psychologically close relationships, with relevant knowledge of the recipient's working life. It might also explain why line manager feedback and other close relationships were cited in the leader survey as providing the most memorable feedback (Figure 4-1/ Table 4-1 above).

This suggests that HR professionals and external coaches are relationally at a relative disadvantage when giving feedback. While provider participants appeared cognisant of the need to build rapport and relationship, the coaches, in particular, seemed more sensitised to this, as evidenced by their apparent greater attention to contracting. It was unclear whether HR professionals felt contracting was unnecessary, given their typically closer working relationships with recipients or was just under-reported by the participants. However, this is potentially an area worthy of greater attention given the complexity of relationships and boundary complications they experienced in the workplace.

Recipients clearly wanted a relationship with feedback providers in which they felt they were the prime client, and in which the developmental intent of the provider was unquestionable. Mirroring this, providers described their commitment to the development of their recipients but also described how other motives and loyalties intruded and, on occasion, conflicted. For example, providers frequently found themselves in remedial relationships, using feedback primarily for corrective rather than developmental purposes. I have argued above that the prime client was often the organisation rather than the recipient. This divided loyalty was particularly evident for the HR participant group, who appeared (unsurprisingly) to identify with the needs of the organisation as much as, if not more than, the needs of the individual. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that, on occasion, leaders appeared unclear about the intent of providers and were consequently reluctant to engage fully.

This would suggest that all providers need greater awareness of the impact of the contracted relationship and the potential gap between their espoused intentions and those perceived by recipients. HR professionals, in particular, cannot assume feedback recipients necessarily trust them, so may need to attend to contracting for feedback more explicitly, paying particular attention to confidentiality and other boundary issues. Despite the prevalence of remedial relationships reported, this appears to be an under-researched area which would merit further investigation.

- *Process factors – constructive delivery, contracting for feedback:*

  In terms of how feedback was delivered, all three participant groups had broadly similar views on what constituted ‘constructive’ delivery. All shared a view that delivery should be honest and open (up to a point), and it was clear that both providers and recipients were trepidatious about hearing/ giving brutally honest (negative) feedback. Both providers and recipients were undecided whether feedback should be balanced (i.e. equal weight given to negative and positive valence messages) or whether it should be direct and unvarnished.

However, the most notable point of difference between providers and recipients was the extent to which constructive delivery was emphasised. In general, both the coaches and the HR professionals laid great stress on this, some holding themselves to very high personal and ethical standards. However, the process of delivery appeared to be less critical for the leaders when feedback was given within the context of a high trust/ psychologically safe relationship. The manner of delivery only became important to them as a factor when delivered by relative strangers. This finding might suggest that providers, in particular coaches, need to pay particular attention to the needs of leaders (e.g. sensitivity of timing and delivery, personalisation of message, signalling caring intent) given their more distant relationship with recipients. It also reinforces the need for providers (particularly HR professionals) to pay attention to contracting for feedback, especially the degree of challenge that is permissible.

- *Recipient factors – recipient evaluation of specific feedback, recipient receptivity:*
  As has been mentioned, none of the leaders interviewed saw themselves as 'open' or 'closed' to feedback, but rather as 'open to a point', i.e. generally interested in hearing feedback but retaining the right to reject some messages on meaning and merit. However, it was evident that providers almost exclusively explained feedback acceptance/ rejection according to perceived recipient receptivity, most applying a binary classification of 'open' or 'closed' to recipients. It was therefore unusual for providers to perceive response to feedback as purely situational, and more usual to see responses as a fixed product of personality or self-esteem. In short, feedback recipients were more likely to

see their responses as reasonable and situational, while providers saw responses as unreasonable and personality-driven.

This difference in perspective is an important finding and may have several explanations. As mentioned above, HR participants and coaches appear more likely to be giving feedback to 'organisational problem children' and might therefore be meeting more defended individuals. However, it is problematic if providers apply a binary classification of feedback receptivity as this is likely to colour how they approach feedback provision and subsequent coaching. While there is emerging literature describing facets of feedback 'receptivity' (Ryan et al., 2000), there is little to support this characteristic as a binary or fixed quality of personality.

- *Provider factors – attitudes to feedback provider and feedback provision, attitudes to feedback recipient:*

  The leaders interviewed had much to say about the qualities of feedback providers as explaining their response to feedback. In contrast, the provider groups tended to stress methods of feedback delivery (process factors) and recipient receptivity as reasons for feedback rejection or acceptance. However, provider attitudes towards giving feedback and preconceptions of feedback recipients were also a salient aspect of the interviews and have been articulated in detail in section 7.1.2 above.

- *Contextual factors – feedback culture, expectations of feedback exchanges:*

  Finally, participants alluded to the broader organisational context as impacting on the nature and impact of feedback exchanges. These findings were therefore consistent with authors (London & Smither, 2002; Gregory et al., 2008) who hypothesise a link between feedback responses and overall feedback 'culture' of the organisation. Feedback culture, as defined by these authors, includes the extent to which i) an organisation takes steps to enhance the quality of manager-subordinate feedback, ii) emphasises the importance of feedback, and iii) provides structures and processes to support its use.

When asked to characterise the feedback culture of the study organisation, both recipients and participants reported it as highly performance/ task-focused, with a lower priority put on developmental conversations in leader-subordinate exchanges. Most felt that the quality and frequency of developmental conversations was 'patchy', and overly dependent on the calibre and interests of individual line managers. Many felt development-focused conversations only took place in the context of formal development events and were too often 'subcontracted' to development specialists. Most leader participants saw the formal performance management process as the main opportunity for developmental conversations with their line managers. However, they saw it as too often playing lip service to this aim, overly process-driven and as highly formulaic. There appeared to be an expectation that any feedback they were likely to receive would be critical/deficit-based, and that feedback-seeking would be seen as unwelcome or as a sign of weakness by their line managers. In contrast, the provider groups were more likely to characterise leaders as feedback avoidant and were critical of their ability to give feedback to their subordinates constructively or developmentally.

This conceptualisation of mediating factors adds to the relatively small body of theoretical work which has considered feedback giving in the context of developmental relationships (see Table 2-6). Table 7-3 below compares the factors proposed with recent and relevant models in the area, using a similar classification to facilitate comparisons. This suggests some overlap with other authors, particularly concerning the impact of recipient receptivity to feedback, and the broader influence of the organisational feedback culture. However, the proposed conceptualisation appears to offer a much more nuanced and complex picture of mediating factors. Joo (2005), in particular, is most akin to the proposed model. However, his conceptualisation offers little detail or elaboration of the mediating factors proposed. There is, therefore, some basis for suggesting that the findings of this research whilst broadly consistent with relevant theories, extends knowledge in the field by providing a detailed and more comprehensive conceptualisation, informed by participant perceptions.

Table 7-3: Comparison of models re. factors mediating feedback

		London & Smither (2002)	Joo (2005)	Gregory et al (2008)	Maxwell (2020)
Scope		3 stage process model of receiving feedback over time	Antecedents, process and outcomes of executive coaching	Five stage process model of receiving feedback within executive coaching	Participant perceptions of pre-conditions of feedback outcomes
Mediating factors	Contextual factors	• Organisations feedback culture	• Organisational support	• Organisational feedback environment • Organisational support	• Recipients perception of feedback culture • Contractual expectations
	Provider factors		• Coach characteristics	• Coach characteristics	• Providers influence approach • Provider attitude to feedback provision
	Recipient factors	• Individual’s Feedback Orientation	• Feedback receptivity • Coachee characteristics	• Executives feedback orientation	• Recipient receptivity to feedback • Recipient evaluation/response of feedback
	Relational factors		• Coaching relationship		• Presence of a trusting working relationship • Participants perceptions of each other
	Input factors				• Credibility of data/ source
	Process factors		• Coaching approach		• Constructive delivery

7.2.3 Comparison of perceptions of different forms of feedback

It was clear from the data that not all forms of feedback were seen equally, and that there were some significant differences in perspectives between providers and recipients. This section examines some of these differences, looking particularly at how participants viewed 360º/ multi-rater feedback and use of psychometric tools.

360º/ multi-rater feedback

The leader survey results showed that 360º/ multi-rater assessment was the single most memorable form of feedback (see Table 4-1). It also featured prominently in the participant interviews as a powerfully impacting form of feedback. It appeared to be the most successful form of feedback judged by the times it was reported as leading to acceptance and change rather than rejection (see Table 4-9). These findings give support to authors who see 360º / multi-rater assessments as a highly effective means of facilitating leadership development (Alimo-Metcalfe, 1998; Day et al., 2014). However, they do not definitively confirm or refute ideas that 360º/ multi-rater feedback is most effective when coupled with coaching (Thach, 2002).

Given the arguments made above, these findings are not surprising. 360º/ multi-rater assessments were seen as a highly credible and trustworthy source of feedback, with individual personal biases perceived less likely to impact overall results. Typically, recipients had a degree of input into their choice of raters which, it could be speculated, increases recipient feelings of volition and engagement. The provenance of final reports is also likely to well understood, given the process of data collection and reporting is relatively transparent. On the occasions were such feedback was rejected, this was usually for reasons of perceived inconsistency between raters, or where the recipient had little or no choice in undertaking the assessment in the first place.

Providers also highly valued 360º/ multi-rater feedback as providing an objective and unbiased assessment of individuals. 360º/multi-rater assessments seemed to be equally deployed in remedial and developmental situations. They were typically used in the early stages of a coaching engagement as a means of intake assessment and diagnosis. Generally, the evidence provided by a 360º/multi-rater assessment went unchallenged; however, there were occasions where providers sided with the recipient's alternative narrative over that given in the report.

Psychometric assessments

Unlike 360º/multi-rater assessment, perspectives on psychometrics were considerably divided. Generally, the providers highly regarded assessments and saw them as an essential part of their approach and as a distinguishing component of their offering and expertise. Such tools were typically used in the early parts of a coaching engagement, often for diagnostic purposes, with choice of the instrument usually led by the coach or organisation. High trust was placed in the results of such instruments as 'objective' and 'scientific', some seeing them as 'revelatory'. There was a tendency, to 'explain' a recipient's personality in terms of an instrument's constructs, and to see this as a complete, deterministic explanation of behaviours. There was also a propensity to see them as providing an objective 'truth' and to defend their use to recipients when challenged. Only one coach appeared uncomfortable with their use (C2), seeing them as incompatible with a non-directive stance.

However, perceptions of such instruments were considerably different in the leader participants. While some found the resultant insights interesting, many appeared to find them entirely unmemorable or even confusing. It was apparent these leaders had completed many such instruments but had failed to retain details or had blurred or misunderstood their constructs. For others, they were simply not a credible data source in that their constructs were not sufficiently understood, and the underlying algorithms opaque. For some, such assessments represented a form of 'non-consensual psychoanalysis', precipitating a higher degree of suspicion than appeared with other forms of feedback. Worryingly there were also incidents were the leader construed psychometric findings as deterministic, and therefore limiting their career prospects and other aspirations.

This difference between providers and recipients represents a conundrum for providers. On the one hand, the use of psychometric tools is prized as a differentiating part of the coach offer to organisations. However, for recipients, they can represent a form of feedback that is of unknown provenance, too often delivered by individuals with whom they have little real relationship. Clearly, this would potentially explain the higher rejection rate indicated in participant narratives and suggests a significant opening for improved practice as well as further research.

It is worth noting, that in incidents featuring strengths-based instruments, adverse reactions appeared somewhat less significant, with coaches reporting good levels of engagement and consequent positive outcomes. This finding is consistent with strengths-based views of leadership development (Buckingham and Goodall, 2019a, 2019b) which purport that positive feedback is significantly more effective in creating higher performance and that critical feedback can only be remedial in effect. However, a significant proportion of the leaders interviewed (particularly the ‘self-doubter’) distrusted entirely positive feedback and devalued it as a source of improvement. As the use of strengths-based tools is still relatively new in coaching, further research into recipient perceptions of such tools would be indicated.

Chapter 8: Discussion

The focus of enquiry in this study has been the nature of developmental feedback conversations and the experience and sense-making of those participating in them. While the topic of feedback has been widely and extensively explored in other contexts, there is little written about the use of feedback in relation to coaching or the lived experience of participants. Such literature that does exist in the coaching field is largely theoretical (see section 2.3.3) and there is little discussion that is directly grounded in empirical data. This study therefore contributes to our practical understanding of how developmental feedback conversations are enacted and interpreted within coaching relationships.

The study also contributes to theoretical debate in the field. While the theoretical literature abounds with formulations in which feedback plays a figural role, there are few specific theories of feedback per se, and cross-disciplinary perspectives have yet to emerge. The literature review presented in Chapter 2, summarised a wide range of these theories, highlighting their potential implications for the feedback relationship. However, these theories appear partial or limited in some regard in as far as no single perspective provides a complete explanation for the complex phenomena reported in this study.

As a researcher using GTM, the relationship with the theoretical literature can be problematic, and I agree with Bryant's position that:

> 'A*dmonitions to ignore the relevant literature must be seen as far too blunt and misguided for doctoral and other researchers, who need to demonstrate familiarity*

with the existing literature as a basis for justifying the innovative potential of their proposed research'. (Bryant, 2017: 104)

As I see it, the researcher's challenge when using GTM, is to be aware of the relevant literature, using it to highlight tentative gaps in knowledge, whilst avoiding becoming overly invested in any one perspective. The researcher must therefore remain grounded in the voices of participants throughout the analysis process, holding theorizing in abeyance as far as possible until this process is completed. Chapters 4-7 therefore present a descriptive summary of those voices and the themes that emerged from the data, whilst attempting to avoid imposing any particular theoretical stance.

In this chapter, I hope to go beyond this inductive phase to provide an over-arching conceptualisation which brings together the key facets of the findings. However, this is also not without its challenges. Bryant suggests that:

> *'… the path from a set of data to a conceptual explanation or theory is far from straightforward. In fact it is never just inductive because for any set of data there will always be more than one possible explanation, although there may be one that stands out based on its parsimony or elegance or potential explanatory power.' (Bryant, 2017: 102-3)*

The discussion that follows, therefore represents my conceptualisation of the findings reported, drawing upon abductive reasoning consistent with the pragmatic philosophy underpinning this research. This conceptualisation therefore represents '*the most plausible* *interpretation of the observed data'* (Charmaz, 2006: 186) having considered the many possible explanations of the data as represented in the literature review.

I will argue that metaphors drawn from complexity and chaos theories, in particular ideas of 'complex adaptive systems', provide a suitable overarching framework for interpreting the study findings. Such theories stress the interaction between implicated parties and the inherent unpredictability of outcomes from these interactions. They also stress the systemic aspects of such interactions, seeing all interactions as situated within a broader context, unfolding over time (Cavanagh, 2006: 315). These characteristics are consistent with the highly individualised, contextual and relational nature of feedback conversations, and the unpredictability of outcomes reported in the findings chapters.

In particular, I draw on the work of (Stacey, 2001, 2011; Stacey, 1996) Stacey (2001, 2011; 1996) and others (Critchley and Stuelten, 2008; Flinn, 2018; Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Suchman, 2002) who have applied complex adaptive systems perspectives to interactions in human systems, for example social and organisational settings. From this perspective, '*…human futures are under perpetual construction through the detail of interaction between human bodies in the living present, namely complex responsive processes of relating'* (Stacey, 2001: 6). I therefore propose that feedback conversation can be seen as a type of 'complex responsive' conversation, and that this perspective is useful in providing an overarching framework to interpret study findings.

This chapter expounds the relevance of this perspective before offering my conceptual interpretation of findings. These conceptualisations therefore represent my theoretical outcomes resulting from applying a Grounded Theory approach. The apparent differences in the stance of providers are debated, and an argument is made that widely different paradigms inform these. Different forms of feedback are considered from the complexity perspective as enablers and constrainers of developmental change in individuals. Comparisons with the existing literature are made throughout.

8.1 Feedback as a complex responsive conversation

The impetus for this research was, in part, inspired by a desire to illuminate the conditions that shape feedback response with a view to improve practice in the area. However, while some general patterns have emerged from the findings, discussed in previous chapters, a hallmark of the individual interview data has been diversity and complexity of experience and, on occasion, the apparently contradictory nature of personal accounts.

Systems theories based on cybernetics, such as Control Theory (Carver and Scheier, 1998, 2002), propose a linear deterministic response to feedback. This theoretical perspective assumes that systems self-regulate their behaviours in predictable ways, in response to discrepant (negative) feedback. While this may be true of simple mechanical systems, this predictability is patently not the case in human systems as studies into feedback effects (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996) have repeatedly demonstrated. While linear causal mechanisms are assumed in most empirical studies in this area, strong associations have often proved elusive (DeNisi and Kluger, 2000; Smither et al., 2005; Smither et al., 1995; Walker and Smither, 1999) or even contradictory. (Woo et al., 2008). This suggests to me that a 'mechanistic' paradigm to explain feedback effects is wanting and that existing (largely linear deterministic) theories of feedback give overly simplistic or partial explanations of this complex phenomenon.

In the following sections I will argue that instead of applying a 'mechanistic' perspective, the phenomena described in the findings' chapters are better explained by metaphors arising from complexity theory, specifically drawing on Stacey's (2001) ideas of 'complex responsive processes of relating'. Stacey (2001) and others (Flinn, 2018; Stacey and Griffin, 2005; Suchman, 2002) suggest that in human 'systems' (including the individual person) are engaged in a continual process of meaning construction through the processes of dialogue with others. Out of the processes of conversation, new or revised mental models are formed and shaped, both enabling and constraining subsequent behaviour and action. Such 'complex responsive conversations' are therefore compatible with the constructivist perspective, and social-constructionist ideas which emphasise the creation of meaning through social action (Gergen, 1985).

While feedback information is an input to this process of meaning-making, I argue that feedback-related conversation can be seen as a particular type of 'complex responsive' conversation. So construed, feedback, from a provider to a recipient, is as an interactive and iterative process of meaning creation between two active participants rather than as a simple transfer or transmission of information from one individual to another. The meaning of feedback is, therefore, an emergent property of the interaction. While general patterns of outcome might be expected, they cannot be predicted with exact certainty given different starting conditions, the multiplicity of interacting variables and the separation of causes and effects over time and place.

Complexity theorists describe systems as nested inter-relating sub-systems (Von Bertalanffy, 1968). Using this lens, feedback conversation can be construed as a holarchy of interacting conversations at different levels (Figure 8-1):

- The organisational feedback 'conversation' or 'feedback culture' – the patterns of influences including expectations, assumptions and norms within the organisational context from which feedback conversations initiate, are shaped, and from which feedback messages derive.
- The feedback dyad conversation - the patterns of interaction between providers and recipients where feedback information is relayed, and the meaning of feedback is co-constructed between participants.
- The intrapersonal conversation of individual recipients – the patterns of internal dialogue between parts of the self where the meaning of feedback is individually constructed and through which feedback is perceived.

Different types of feedback data, therefore, represent transfers of information across different system boundaries (see Figure 8-1). At each level of the system, conditions exist which enable and constrain the flow of information and which influence the patterns of dialogue and emergence of novel meaning-making. Sections 8.1.1-8.1.3 below considers these conditions at each of the three levels.

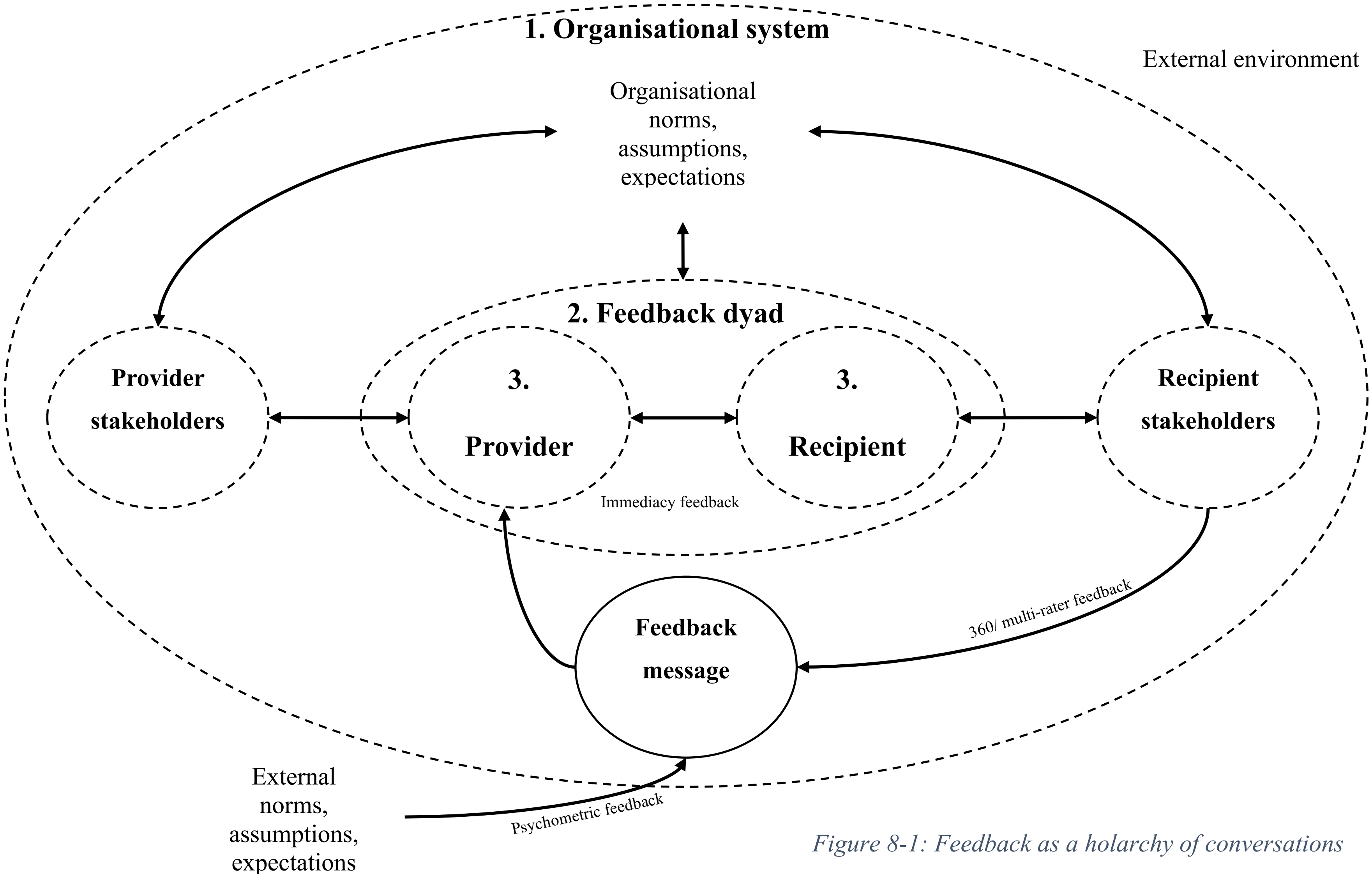

Figure 8-1: Feedback as a holarchy of conversations

8.1.1 The organisational feedback conversation – ‘feedback culture’.

The organisational context within which feedback conversation takes place has been a facet of the literature which has largely been ignored until relatively recently. However, as notable exceptions, theorists such as London and Smither (2002) and Gregory et al. (2008) suggest that feedback conversations must be seen within the context of an overall feedback ‘culture’. They propose that organisational feedback culture mediates individual ‘feedback orientation’, i.e. the extent to which an individual is receptive to feedback, will seek feedback out, value it and act upon it. However, this literature implies that the feedback orientation of an individual can be influenced deterministically in a top-down fashion by, for example, providing training in feedback skills, articulating standards of performance or expected competencies. Indeed, the study organisation appeared to share this assumption and had heavily invested in interventions with the hope and expectation of improving the quality and quantity of feedback between leaders and subordinates.

However, from the perspective of complex responsive systems, organisational feedback ‘culture’ does not exist as an organisation-wide ‘entity’ but rather represents the patterning of all feedback conversation between individuals at a local level (Figure 8-2). Feedback ‘culture’ from this perspective cannot, therefore, be engineered predictably by top-down intervention alone but comes about through shifts in patterns of conversation and the assumptions and paradigms that drive them.

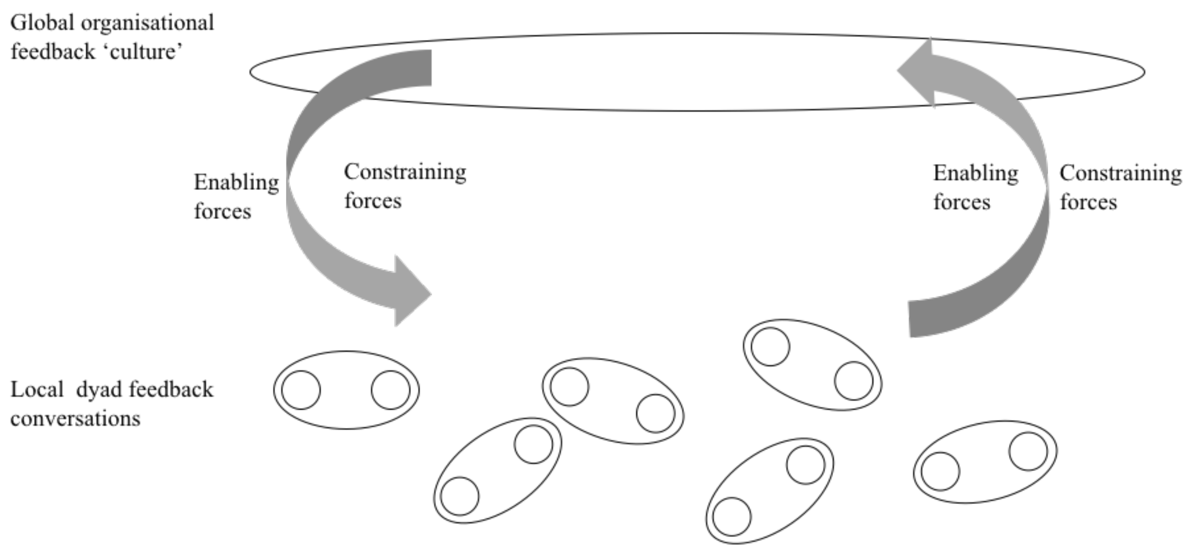

Figure 8-2: Organisational feedback 'culture' as a complex responsive system (Adapted from Eoyang & Halliday, (2013: 16)

I would argue that the dominant paradigm informing feedback conversation in the study organisation was rooted in mechanistic (Weiner, 1954) and cognitivist assumptions (Gardner, 1985). Negative criticism was seen as the prime driver of improvement and therefore assumed to facilitate individual development. In terms of existing patterning of conversations, recipients clearly 'swam in a sea' of ad hoc critical/negative feedback, mainly directed at their task performance, but much less frequently experienced developmentally oriented or affirmative conversation. The 'feedback culture' could, therefore, be described as deficit-biased and predominantly remedial in nature. The data also suggested that feedback flows were also inhibited by power structures, with downward feedback from line managers considered most significant. These findings are consistent with theorists (Tourish and Tourish, 2012) who see feedback flows as highly constrained by hierarchy and power differentials.

It appeared that most providers shared this 'mechanistic' perspective, and some felt legitimised by the power structures of the organisations to give criticism in the name of development. This was evidenced by the very high proportion of incidents in the provider accounts which were remedial in nature, where the provider was contracted by organisational stakeholders (e.g. HR or line management) to 'fix' deviant behaviours. As has been noted in Section 7.2.1, strong narrative themes amongst the providers, particularly the HR providers, were the 'unaware' leader and the 'toxic' leader, which appeared to problematise recipients and condition dialogue considerably. This is consistent with Cavanagh's (2006) views that the mechanistic and reductive perspective results in a '*name, shame and blame'* approach. In this approach '*the locus of dysfunction is seen to be the individual's choices or even the individual's personality'* rather than a *'host of factors working in an interdependent way to create the outcome'* (Cavanagh, 2006: 316).

8.1.2 The dyadic feedback conversation

As noted in Chapter 2: Literature Review, much of the empirical literature in this area is concerned with two strands of debate. The first strand is primarily concerned with the properties and efficacy of feedback instruments, specifically psychometrics (Harper, 2008; McDowall and Kurz, 2007; Scoular and Campbell, 2007) and the use of 360º/multi-rater feedback, particularly in coaching and leadership development contexts (Jarzebowski et al., 2012; Kochanowski et al., 2010; Luthans and Peterson, 2003; Olivero et al., 1997; Thach, 2002). A second, and more recent, strand of thought and research concerns origins and determinants of recipient receptivity to feedback (Bozer et al., 2013; Gregory and Levy, 2012; London and Smither, 2002) and attempts to measure this property and correlate it with intervention outcomes (Braddy et al., 2013; Linderbaum and Levy, 2010).

Little attention has, therefore, been paid to the role and perceptions of feedback participants (recipients and providers) and the impact of their relationship on feedback outcomes. In particular, the role, stance and influence of the feedback provider appears to be an under-explored area to date. However, Joo (2005), as a notable exception, takes a more systemic perspective on feedback, hypothesising (in the context of coaching relationships) that recipient and coach characteristics, combined with the relationship between them, mediate likely feedback outcomes. However, he provides little detail behind this and no empirical evidence.

Findings suggest that the attributes of providers and recipients, as well as the dynamics of their relationship, mediate feedback outcomes. These findings support the 'complex responsive' perspective, which explicitly sees all conversation as dynamic and relational, enabled and constrained by the broader context and by the interaction of individual 'agents. All agents are regarded as active implicated participants in the process in creating meaning (consciously or otherwise) and that an objective, neutral stance is impossible. Meaning is seen as emerging through the process of dialogue and does not rest with any one participant. So construed, the meaning of feedback emerges from a process of active interpretation by participants rather than having a predetermined meaning.

I propose Figure 8-3 below, adapted from Cavanagh (2006: 338), as a conceptualisation of the dyadic feedback conversation in terms of a complex responsive process. This diagram intends to show feedback conversation as an interpretive process occurring in the public shared relational space between participants, and in the private intrapersonal space of individuals. Meaning is created through dialogue through an iterative co-influencing process of response and counter-response.

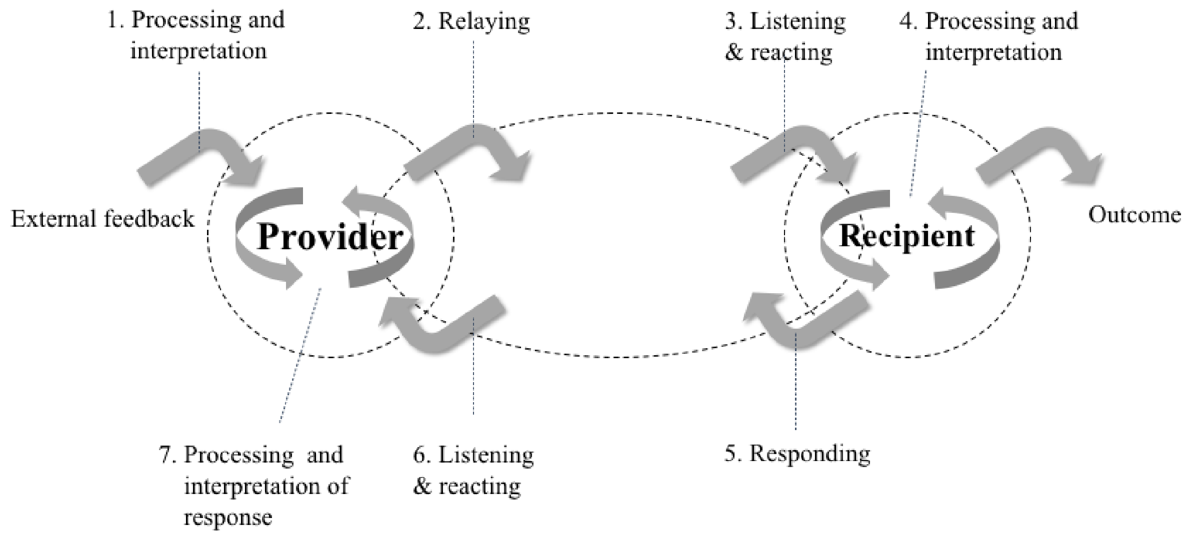

Figure 8-3: Feedback dyadic as a complex responsive system (Adapted from Cavanagh, 2006:338)

Section 7.2.2 summarised the conditions participants reported as enabling (or constraining) feedback acceptance and change. I see these factors as residing in different parts of the dyad, in i) the public interpersonal space between participants, ii) the private intrapersonal world of participants, as well as iii) being influenced by the wider organisational system via the expectations of external stakeholders. (Figure 8-4 below). Some factors were, therefore, 'invisible' in the conversation (e.g. perceptions and assumptions of each other, external stakeholder expectations) whilst nevertheless shaping the conversation and its potential outcome.

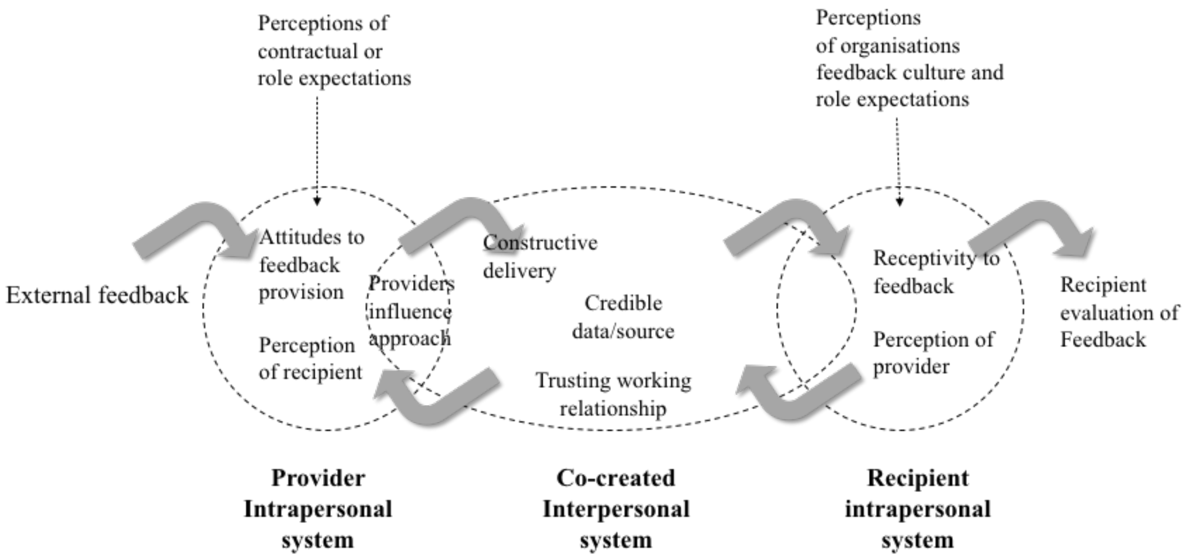

Figure 8-4: The feedback dyad: conditions enabling and constraining feedback outcome (as reported by participants)

Stacey (2001, 2011) suggests that power dynamics are always at play in complex responsive systems as an implicit factor. For example, unlike coaching conversations, the conversation is initiated by the provider, suggesting an inherent power imbalance at least at the beginning of most feedback conversations. Such power inequalities were also potentially apparent where the recipient had little or no choice about their involvement (e.g. remedial coaching contracts, forced or mandated use of 360º feedback) and where expert tools were deployed as a form of individual diagnosis. The data suggested that recipients keenly perceived such imbalances, and lack of personal volition coloured their willingness to engage with feedback and commit to any subsequent action. This potentially 'coercive' aspect of feedback has not been explored in the literature, although personal volition has been considered as a mediating factor in some studies of feedback-seeking (Ashford, 1986; De Stobbeleir and Ashford, 2012; Milward-Purvis et al., 2010).

8.1.3 The intrapersonal 'conversation'.

In the context of complex responsive systems, complexity theorists suggest that our sense of 'self' (or identity) emerges dynamically through social interaction with others. So construed, the opinions of others (often in the form of feedback) are therefore crucial in continually forming our sense of self, as well as indicating our current relative 'fit' with the demands of our environment. Extending this argument, Cavanagh suggests that our sense of self also emerges from our internal dialogue.

> *"It is a conversation we have with ourselves in which we seek to form intentions and to elaborate ideas, models, explanations and other narratives so as to resolve the tensions that arise when we are faced with challenges, or to discharge or avoid emotional states that arise within us… It is out of this ongoing dialogue that our sense of self develops and is maintained."* Cavanagh, 2006:330

So construed, feedback from others may therefore be seen as a challenge to existing internal narratives, which must be reconciled and integrated, in order to maintain a coherent sense of 'self'. Feedback that does not fit with existing narratives must therefore be rejected, or the internal narrative elaborated to include it. However, feedback from others can also be interpreted as reinforcing existing narratives and consequently perpetuating or strengthening attitudes and behaviours. Paradoxically, I, therefore, see the 'sense of self' as both formed from feedback, and as the prism by which feedback is interpreted (Figure 8-5 below).

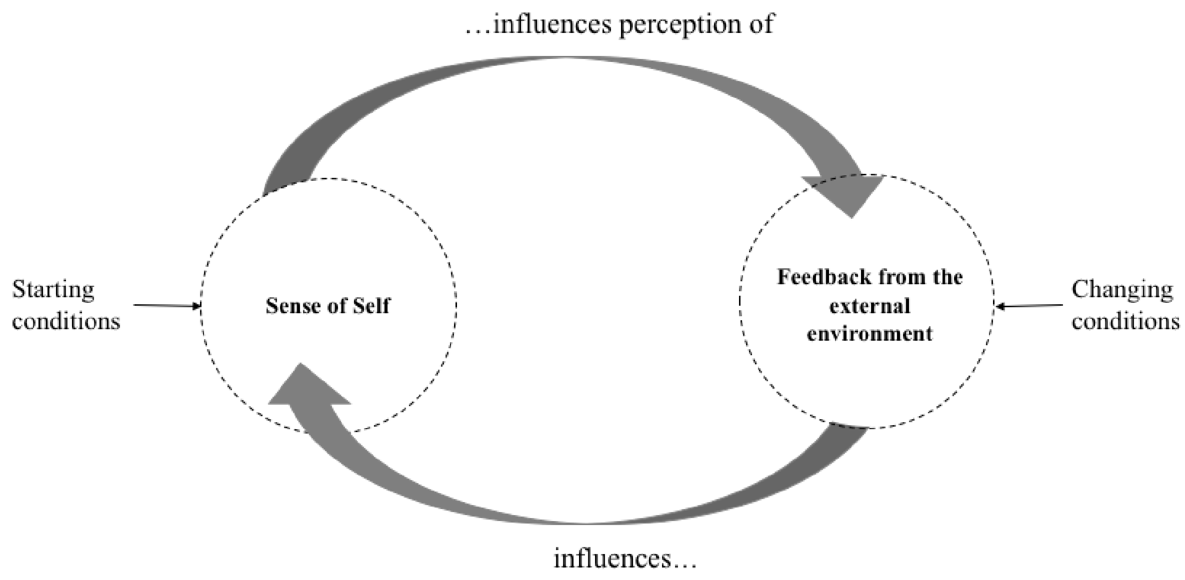

Figure 8-5: Co-influence between external feedback and sense of self

The interview data suggested two very distinct patterns of feedback interpretation. For many participants, feedback information appeared to be interpreted as a purely practical matter, mainly to do with their 'fit' with external demands. This sort of feedback appeared to be processed relatively unemotively according to logical considerations. If accepted, feedback then led to adjustments in behaviours and practices, which were sustained if they proved beneficial. However, other feedback appeared to be interpreted as implicating the 'self' and was processed, with more apparent affect, according to 'fit' with existing self-conceptions. These differences within findings are consistent with the Kluger & DeNisi's Feedback Intervention Theory (1996), which suggests feedback implicates at separate task and 'self' levels.

Outcomes from feedback can therefore be framed according to the extent to which they reform or reinforce i) self-narratives or ii) current practices and behaviours. I present a summary of recipient interview data using these dimensions as Figure 8-6 below. This model indicates the typical rationale given by recipients for their acceptance or rejection of feedback, as well as indicating the degree of discrepancy perceived.

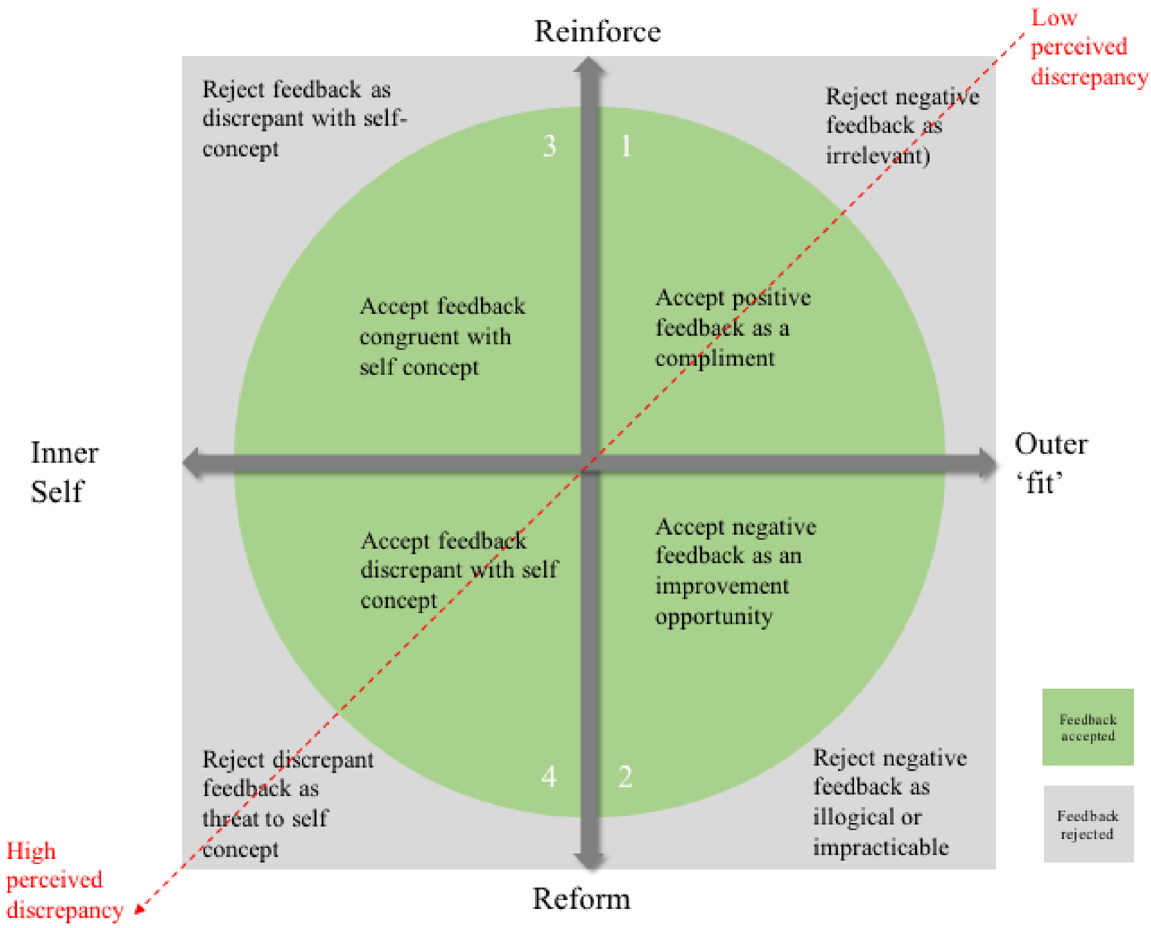

Figure 8-6: Rationales for feedback acceptance or rejection

While Quadrant 2 rationales appeared most frequently in the interviews, the data did not support conclusions that individuals displayed fixed preferences for a particular type of response to feedback. Indeed some individuals appeared to use all four rationales at different times. However, the 'pragmatist' group appeared to apply Quadrant 1 and 2 rationales more typically, i.e. saw feedback as an impersonal matter to be evaluated on its logical merits. However, the 'self-doubter' and 'self-certain' groups did appear to experience feedback as implicating the self more often and to interpret it in ways that reinforced their existing self-image (Quadrant 3). For example, 'self-doubters' generally appeared dismissive of positive feedback, whilst the 'self-certain' seemed more dismissive of criticism. These latter findings lend support to self-consistency theorists (Korsgaard, 1996; Swann, 1997; Swann and Read, 1981), who predict an asymmetric response to feedback valence driven by an underlying desire to maintain a stable sense of self. However, the data did not support their conclusions as applicable in all situations.

These empirical findings also appear to contradict some aspects of theoretical conceptualisations of feedback 'orientation' (London & Smither, 2002), which propose that feedback receptivity is deterministically linked to personality and individual difference variables such as 'openness to experience' (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The findings also refute a binary conceptualisation of 'openness' to feedback, prevalent amongst the provider interviews. However, the findings did lend support to London & Smither's contentions that levels of self-esteem and the need to protect the ego mediates feedback receptivity, but suggest these motives might be prevalent only in some circumstances.

I, therefore, construe feedback receptivity as an emergent property of specific situations, in which a complex mix of contextual, relational and situational influences play out. At the intrapersonal level, I see receptivity to feedback as highly influenced by i) message characteristics (e.g. valence, degree of discrepancy perceived, credibility), ii) the level at which it implicates the individual (personal or practical) and iii) personality factors (e.g. self-confidence, current narratives, beliefs and value systems). See Figure 8-7 below.

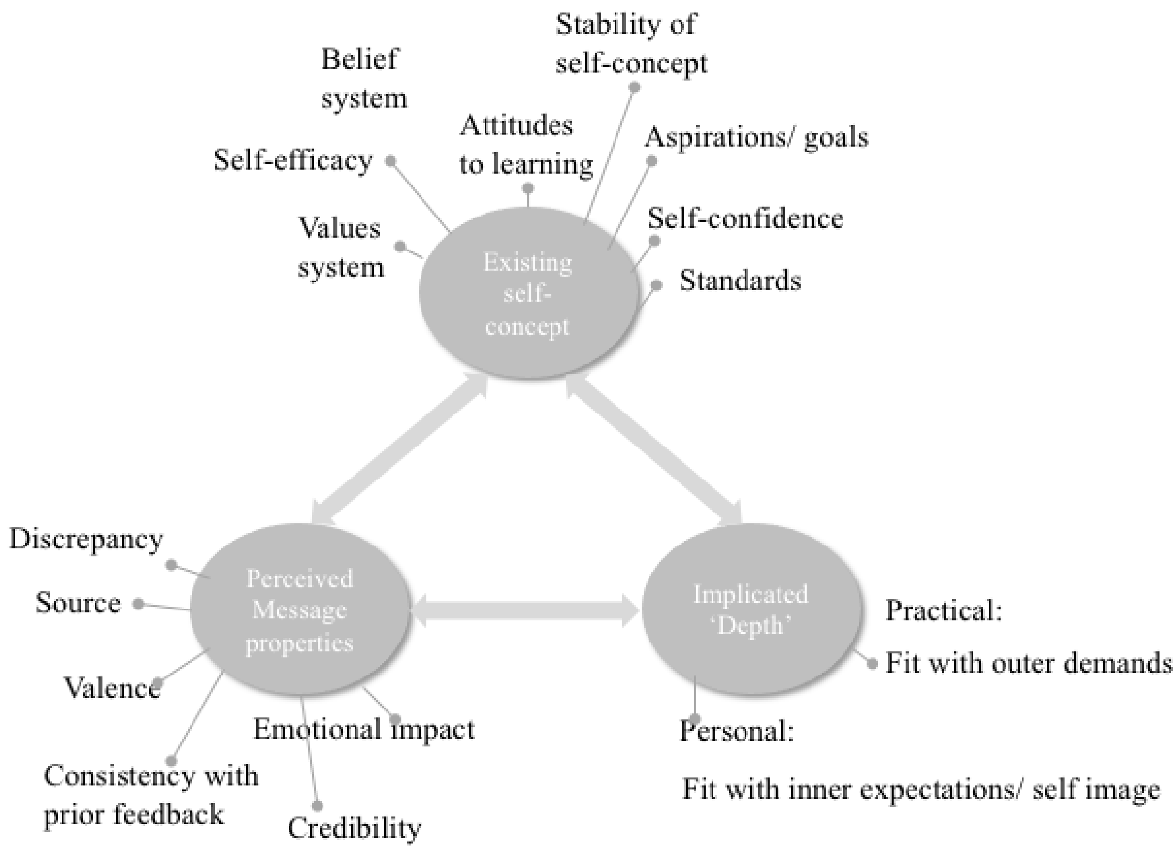

Figure 8-7: Conceptualisation of factors impacting feedback receptivity

From a complexity perspective, development of a system is the capacity to elaborate '*more effective structures and processes in response to the inevitable challenges of life*' (Cavanagh, 2006:318). While all four response to feedback can result in such elaboration, in some circumstances they rigidify the status quo. For example, Quadrant 1 and 3 responses may benefit an individual by stabilising or strengthening ways of working and behaviours. However, these responses risk missing possible relevant improvement opportunities and development of fixed ways of responding to the environment. Quadrant 2 responses can also be seen as beneficial by having a stabilising effect on self-concept but runs the risk of perpetuating overly selective feedback perception (Maxwell and Bachkirova, 2010) when self-esteem issues are implicated.

Quadrant 4 responses were displayed most commonly in situations where feedback was seen as highly discrepant with the sense of self, and might therefore be assumed to have no developmental outcomes. However, this quadrant appeared to offer the most opportunity for growth, assuming dissonant feelings are contained. For example, three ‘self-doubter’ participants reported a substantive positive shift in their self-concept after receiving and accepting affirmative discrepant feedback from trusted colleagues. This feedback, therefore, appeared to allow them to elaborate a significantly new way of thinking about themselves, resulting in sustained changes in how they operated and related to others. It might, therefore, be tempting to assume that an intervention could engineer such development. However, from a complexity perspective, this type of conclusion is to be avoided, if this type of change is construed as a type of unpredictable discontinuous shift (Suchman, 2002), in response to ‘tipping point’ conditions. (Gladwell, 2000).

From the perspective of development professionals, this interpretation of findings suggests several potential directions to inform practice. To use feedback more effectively, providers may therefore need to:

- Support recipients to vocalise their interpretations of feedback rather than provide interpretations for them, testing the assumptions and logic used by recipients form their conclusions.
- Be alert to the selective interpretation of feedback by recipients, e.g. devaluing of either positive or negative feedback. Providers may therefore need to rebalance overly selective interpretations by providing a voice for excluded information.
- Provide a degree of ‘emotional holding’ to support toleration of perceived discrepant information and consequent dissonant reactions. This may be particularly necessary where feedback challenges the ‘sense’ of self.

- Explore with recipients if they privilege maintaining ‘fit’ with the environment over maintaining a coherent sense of self (or vice versa), and the associated costs of doing so
- Support recipients to translate interpretations of feedback into practical action and plan strategies for evaluating results and impacts
- Support recipients to access formal and informal feedback from diverse sources within their network, i.e. improve the quality and quantity of feedback available to individuals and encourage feedback-seeking behaviours.

8.2 Providers stance from a complexity perspective

In this section, I seek to explore and contrast the position and role of the feedback provider from traditional ‘mechanistic’ and from complexity perspectives. I contend that these very different theoretical perspectives influence the stance and methods of the feedback provider, and potentially give rise to very different outcomes.

From the traditional objectivist/ mechanistic perspective (Carver and Scheier, 1998, 2002; Weiner, 1954), a feedback provider can be seen as an external intervenor who provides objective and unbiased information to another, with the intention of changing them in a pre-determined direction. However, the complex responsive perspective rejects the position of the objective external intervenor as an impossibility:

> *“Individuals may consciously and intentionally seek to influence the evolving pattern of meaning, to direct it towards a pattern they desire. Here arises a paradox - although they may perceive themselves as acting upon the process from the outside, they are always within it – it can never be otherwise.”* (Suchman, 2002: 6)

Instead, the complexity perspective (Stacey, 2001, 2011; Stacey, 1996) informs a view of feedback providers as implicated participants, who bring their assumptions, beliefs and biases into the conversations. Differences in provider stance and ways of working, as described in Section 7.1.2, therefore shape the nature of the conversation, the quality of relationship formed with recipients, as well as enable and constrain potential outcomes.

I would argue that the data suggested that provider attitudes toward giving feedback more often conformed to an 'objectivist/mechanistic' paradigm, in that most providers saw themselves as objective and detached from the process of giving feedback. Further, the feedback was seen, by most, as a message to be delivered, rather than data to be explored. The effectiveness of feedback was judged by providers, not by the insights generated, but rather by the results of their persuasion techniques.

Adopting a complexity perspective implies that providers revise their intentions and potentially opens up more fruitful ways of working and relating to recipients. Rather than seeing feedback as an act of information transmission and skilful persuasion, the complexity perspective suggests the providers' appropriate role is to provoke a process of reflection and inquiry. In this process, the provider supports, challenges and contributes to the recipient's meaning making processes. The focus therefore shifts towards creating an environment in which recipients can explore diverse information sources, learn to tolerate any arising discomfort, and make meaningful connections to their lived experiences. Providers' experience of recipients through 'in the moment' feedback may therefore be seen as a highly relevant input into the conversation and avoids over-dependence on second-hand sources.

Table 8-1 below, summarises the potential implications of the mechanistic and complexity perspectives in terms of the positioning of feedback information, the provider role in the conversations, and views of recipients:

Table 8-1: Comparison of implications for feedback provision

	Mechanistic perspective	**Complexity perspective**
Feedback conversation as:	Information transmission from provider to the recipient	Iterative dialogue of meaning construction
Feedback information as:	An external ‘truth - ontological ‘realism’.	A subjective perspective (among many) - ontological relativism
Role of provider:	Represent the meaning of feedback on behalf of others Facilitate recipient acceptance	Collaborator and provocateur in a process of joint inquiry
Provider stance:	Objective Independent	Subjective Interdependent
Relationship with the recipient:	Unequal relationship based on expertise Sanctioned by external power relationships	A dynamic relationship where power is negotiated Sanctioned by recipient volition
View of recipient:	Passive recipient or problem to be solved. No prior experience or history Defensiveness problematised	Active/ resourced recipient Relevant prior experience and expertise Defensiveness as functional
Outcomes	Towards predetermined standards or goals	Emergent from interaction

However, I recognise that the complexity perspective is far from mainstream in leadership development and coaching circles. As a perspective, it may be uncomfortable for many providers in that it challenges ‘taken for granted’ practice and custom and questions the role of the feedback provider as an external intervenor. For example, this perspective suggests that some providers may need to revise their image as a 'Psy-expert' (Western, 2012) by lessening their dependency on assessments or by being more rigorous in their reasons for using them. It may also suggest that some providers may need to establish a more equal relationship with recipients and learn to privilege their perspectives to a far greater extent.

> *"However, the complexity perspective challenges us to let go of our image of ourselves as saviours, bearers of best practice or finely tuned analytical solutions, and to become participants and designers of opportunities for people to explore the issues for themselves, to make their own meaning and to take thoughtful action in the knowledge that outcomes are unpredictable." (Critchley and Stuelten, 2008: 6)*

Perhaps most uncomfortably, the complexity perspective also questions the extent to which outcomes can be explicitly guaranteed to stakeholders, and therefore the fundamental nature of the contract between organisation and provider.

8.3 Use of different forms of feedback from a complexity perspective

Much of the feedback literature to date has focused on the efficacy of different forms of feedback instrument, with little attention paid to the experience of participants using such tools (Buckle, 2012; Dalby, 2019). The study data (section 7.2.3) suggested that while recipients strongly valued feedback from immediate, trusted relationships (either directly or mediated via 360º/ multi-rater reports), coaches and HR providers place great stall by instrumental forms of feedback.

From a complexity perspective, authors (Flinn, 2018; Stacey, 2011), see the use of instrumental feedback as largely problematic, perpetuating a view of leadership rooted in individual agency and individual psychology. They, therefore, argue that the conventional focus of developing self-awareness in leader development (Cooper, 2010; Luft, 1961; Reilly et al., 2014), although prevalent, is misguided and feedback-giving should instead '*raise awareness of self and others, in relation to and with self and other*s' (Flinn, 2018:94). Discussion of individual leader behaviours, so construed, should not, therefore, be separated from the social contexts from which they arise.

The balance of this section examines the three main types of feedback used by the provider groups from the complexity perspective: 360º/ multi-rater feedback, psychometric and personality assessment-based feedback and ad hoc 'in the moment' comment. The differing ways they potentially enable or constrain meaning-making between participants are considered and compared with study findings.

8.3.1 360º/multi-rater feedback

The interview data strongly suggested that all participants considered 360º/multi-rater feedback as one of the most credible and impactful forms of developmental feedback, and as a valued way of gathering feedback from stakeholders, especially when direct communication was constrained. In particular, recipients appeared to find the free-form verbatim element most memorable and useful. This finding was echoed by the coach participants who stressed its value as a springboard to further conversation.

From a complexity perspective, Flinn (2018) also draws attention to the discursive value and nuanced nature of verbatim comment in 360º/multi-rater feedback reports, and the significance of this commentary as a jumping-off point to further conversation between stakeholders. However, Flinn cites particular objection to scored 360º assessments, seeing these as underpinned by deterministic competency models of leadership which potentially reinforce stereotypes and dominant norms of behaviours:

> *"360º feedback questionnaires are based on an understanding of leadership as something that can be reduced to individual behaviours and/or agency… The qualities and traits identified in 360º feedback surveys are all too often based on the archetype of the tough, white, heterosexual male leaving little space for anybody who does not fit this picture. This not only discourages diversity… but also potentially feeds the unconscious (and/or conscious) bias of the subject and raters."* (Flinn, 2018: 91-92)

I would therefore argue that 360º/multi-rater assessments report two very different types of information: firstly, the extent to which a leader satisfies the needs of immediate stakeholders in their network, and secondly, their perceived ‘fit’ with the values and expectations of the wider organisation as interpreted by those stakeholders. From a developmental perspective, the findings suggest the first type of information is of most value as long as the circumstances and contexts that gave rise to it can be discussed, and blame avoided. I regard the second type of data as more problematic, given its decontextualized nature. Providers might instead be better facilitating discussion of the recipient’s views of the organisation’s stated values and expectations, and the extent to which they perceive this as congruent with their own value system.

I also concur with Lawrence and Moore’s view (2019) that 360º/ multi-rater feedback exercises are generally held too infrequently to be of relevance, given the ever-changing contexts in which leaders operate:

> *‘Collecting feedback on a formal basis, every six to twelve months, may provide useful data, but effective leaders also build networks of informal feedback channels through which they have access to on-going real-time feedback’*. (Lawrence and Moore, 2019:76)

This stance implies that leader development is best facilitated via continuous conversation and by seeking feedback from diverse sources. However, the interviews suggested that developmental feedback was a more discontinuous event, usually abstracted from the context in which leaders operated. I was considerably impressed by those few leaders who took their 360º reports back to their teams and used this data to initiate further conversations about their leadership style and effectiveness. This approach strikes me as a more genuinely systemic deployment of 360º feedback opening up the possibility of novel conversation in leader-subordinate relationships, as well as setting the conditions for more continuous and direct dialogue. However, I also recognise that many leader-subordinate relationships do not allow for such open conversation.

8.3.2 Psychometric-based feedback

Unlike 360º/ multi-rater feedback, the findings showed a significant discrepancy in the perception of psychometric-based feedback between providers and recipients. While the providers, particularly the coaches, showed considerable belief in the value of psychometrics, recipients' perceptions were altogether more variable and even sceptical at times. These provider findings support limited empirical research in this area (Buckle, 2012; McDowall and Smewing, 2009), which suggests that many coaches see psychometric assessments as enabling the coaching process. The coach perspectives also echoed views that such tools act as an accelerant to the coaching process, providing a source of objective comparative data:

> *"When used in coaching, the purpose of using psychometric instruments is to generate insights that the client wouldn't otherwise have access to, or would take a long time to develop… Because of its relative objectivity, a psychometric measure can help introduce new, trusted information to help unblock a client's current thinking and provide new perspectives on difficult issues."* (Bourne, 2007: 390)

However, some authors (Flinn, 2018; Western, 2012) challenges this view, suggesting that the use of psychometrics plays a central part in the dominant 'Psy Expert' and managerial discourse, perpetuating a view of the person as '*an object to be changed rather than as person to be accepted*' (Western, 2012: 176). They suggest the use of such tools benefits the provider as much as the recipient, and affords coaches (and others) legitimisation of their work:

> *"Psychometrics and other Psy Expert sanctioned tools are the perfect fit for coaches and managers as they are tangible, they give kudos to the coach and they give actual data and results. The usefulness of different tools and how they are used are hotly debated. However, for coaches they offer the perfect entry point to executive coaching"* (Western, 2012:166)

From a complexity perspective, some theorists (Flinn, 2018) also view psychometrics as reinforcing a simplistic individual-centred view of leadership, providing reductive explanations of behaviours based on individual personality and personal psychology. This view potentially problematises the use of most psychometric instruments, especially those that reduce individuals to a type or a trait score.

The interview data suggested recipient response to psychometrics was highly variable, ranging from considerable curiosity to forceful resistance. This finding echoes Dalby's (2019) and Buckle's (2012) findings, which suggested that coaches could not predict coachees responses to such assessments. While I would argue that these tools can provide a useful function as a conversation opener, the data suggested how they are used often created the opposite effect. The data also highlighted some potential ethical issues in the use of such tools, suggesting that some coaches do not understand the limitations of the tools they employ or how they might provoke defensiveness in recipients.

8.3.3 Immediacy feedback

Immediate ‘in the moment’ feedback, differs from 360º/ multi-rater and psychometric assessment feedback, in that it arises out of the direct experience of the provider in dialogue with the recipient. This use of feedback would appear compatible with the complexity perspective, with its validity resting on systemic assumptions that recipient patterns of behaving in the feedback dyad, parallel those in a recipient’s wider system. Sharing such observations is therefore deemed to be both highly relevant and a potentially powerful form of leverage:

> *“Your own interaction with the executive is a window into his characteristic patterns… you act on the belief that what happens in the immediacy of the moment is what happens “out there” in the executives world.”* O'Neill (2000)

However, the findings suggested that giving ‘in the moment’ feedback was conflated often with giving opinion, judgements and advice. This has both practical and ethical implications and suggests some coaches at least are unaware of the extent to which their personal biases intrude into coaching conversations. Giving observational ‘in the moment’ feedback, therefore appears an area for extending and refining professional practice.

8.4 Summary

I have argued in this chapter that complexity perspectives, particularly ideas of ‘complex processes of relating’ can be used as a lens to interpret the findings presented in Chapters 4-7. This perspective potentially provides a more comprehensive explanation for the phenomena reported than extant theories, as well as pointing to an alternate frame of reference to inform practitioners. The complexity perspective suggests that feedback conversation should be seen within the context of wider organisational ‘feedback culture’ and positions the process of providing feedback as a dynamic interaction between implicated individuals. Feedback outcomes are, therefore, the product of mediating factors at the organisational, interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. A conceptualisation of the intrapersonal interpretation of feedback is presented, based on recipient experiences. This model integrates and builds upon existing theories, offering a dynamic view of human development moving through cycles of self-reinforcement and self-reformation.

I have argued that current provider practices appear to be primarily informed by objectivist/ mechanistic perspectives and have highlighted how the stance, role and methods of the feedback provider might differ according to a complexity perspective. Alternative ways of working, consistent with this frame of reference, are described and discussed. Finally, the chapter concluded with an overview of different forms of developmental feedback, debating the extent to which these might be compatible with a complexity perspective. This argument concludes that feedback is least useful for developmental purposes when abstracted from the contexts in which leaders operate or when used as a form of power or judgement over recipients. Further implications for stakeholders are delineated in Chapter 9: Conclusions.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In this research study, I sought to explore how feedback participants (providers and recipients) experience and make sense of feedback conversations and their outcomes, and how recipients subsequently act upon them. The study was situated in the context of a large international engineering company and was primarily concerned with feedback given with the intent of developing its senior leaders. In this chapter, I summarise gaps identified in the existing literature, the main findings of this study and how these contribute to and extend the current debate. Strengths, limitations and challenges relating to the research methods deployed are discussed, and directions for future research recommended. Implications for organisational and individual stakeholders are discussed, and recommendations for practice are made. The chapter concludes with some personal reflections on my research journey.

9.1 Theoretical contribution

While feedback research is extensive, multi-faceted and multi-disciplinary, empirical research in the area has mainly been quantitative, typically focussing on various facets of feedback intervention and determining their effects on task performance. Research into the developmental effects of feedback has, therefore, been more limited. More recently work in the field of leadership development has explored the developmental effects of feedback, particularly when combined with interventions such as coaching. Initial conceptualisations of the processes involved in giving feedback and the conditions that shape recipient receptivity have also been offered by theorists. However, to date, the lived experiences and perspectives of feedback participants (providers and recipients) are aspects which have been under-unexplored. This study, therefore, contributes to knowledge by providing an account of participants' experience of developmental feedback conversations, their sense-making of that experience and their explanations for their responses and outcomes.

The use of feedback for developmental purposes is currently a billion-dollar global industry. Practitioners (and organisations) have largely assumed this to be a beneficial form of personal development intervention, despite repeated empirical studies (Kluger and DeNisi, 1996) indicating more mixed results, particularly when feedback is directed at the 'self'. There has been limited critical investigation of the assumptions that underpin this industry, or the role played by sanctioned feedback providers (internal coaches, HR and L&D professionals, external coaches) under those assumptions.

The study engages in the debate by offering a novel conceptualisation of feedback as a form of 'complex responsive' conversation, at the level of the organisation, feedback dyad, and intrapersonal conversation. While this conceptualisation appears to provide a more comprehensive and systemic explanation of the data, findings suggest that participant behaviours and attributions are more commonly informed by assumptions consistent with linear determinism.

The study also contributes to practice by providing a deeper understanding of the types of feedback most memorable to leaders, suggesting that highly contextualised feedback from close trusted relationships is most highly valued and most likely to be acted upon. This finding implies that these sources of feedback could be leveraged more actively. and that those line relationships are critical to fostering leader development. It also casts reservations on the relative effectiveness of feedback derived from sources outside of the social networks in which leaders operate, particularly feedback derived from psychometric instruments or those with whom little trust is established. The findings also suggested that while developmental change is as likely to come from positive feedback as negative, leaders are more predisposed to expect deficiency information and criticism to be the well-spring for change.

The study findings suggest that HR professionals and coaches are frequently involved in giving remedial feedback, and often experience resistance and reluctance from recipients. These circumstances can bear an emotional toll on providers, and some appeared ill-equipped for these challenges, either in terms of the training they received, their theoretical understanding or the support they receive from their supervisors. The findings suggest that most providers perceived themselves as objective intervenors, sanctioned and empowered by their role positions or expert use of tools to deliver predetermined feedback messages. However, the data suggested a more implicated position in which provider assumptions, attitudes and attributions shaped the feedback conversation, along with those of the recipients. Applying the complexity perspective, I, therefore, argue for a reconceptualization of the role of feedback provider as an active, implicated co-participant in a process of meaning-making. Practical implications of these conclusions are offered in section 9.3 below.

Specifically, the study offers the following novel conceptualisations:

- *A model of the conditions influencing feedback outcomes* (Table 7-2*)*, based on the reported experience and reasons given by both recipients and providers for feedback outcomes. This model significantly elaborates on the few similar (theoretical) conceptualisations in the field and provides a more nuanced understanding of the complexity involved. Findings suggested some significant differences in perspective and potential mismatches of expectation between providers and recipients, which may inhibit feedback conversation. Typically, participants appeared to understate their influence on the conversations, the potential power dynamics at play or the impact of organisational expectations and norms. This model potentially provides coaches with a better understanding of the totality of factors at play and how they may inhibit or enhance productive feedback conversations. The model is also of potential value to organisational development specialists tasked with enhancing the quantity and quality of feedback as a means of leader development.

- *A model of the feedback process and associated ways of working* (Figure 7-1), as reported by providers. This process model (again) significantly elaborates upon existing theoretical formulations and provides empirical evidence of actual practices. It suggests that HR professionals and coaches follow broadly similar steps but indicate a more nuanced and rigorous approach by external coaches, particularly regarding contracting. Contracting for feedback, therefore, appeared to be an area worthy of greater attention by internal coaches. This model has potential applications in training coaches in the effective use of feedback, as well as informing methods of working.

- *A model of provider 'stance'* (Figure 7-2), based on the styles of influence displayed by providers and the relative balance of loyalties to the organisational or individual agenda. This suggested some areas of potential ethical concern, particularly for those using a 'forcing' style. This model also has potential value to developing coaches and provides a framework to discuss styles of working with associated risks and benefits. The model may therefore be of value to coach supervisors who oversee coach practitioners, both in terms of ensuring safe and ethical practice, as well as resourcing coaching with alternate approaches.

- *A model of rationales for feedback response* (Figure 8-6) as suggested by recipient accounts. This model integrates and elaborates upon existing theories of feedback response, providing an overarching framework which accommodates the complexity of behaviours reported. This model potentially provides practitioners with insights into how recipients make sense of feedback and suggests a range of strategies for deepening and expanding client understanding. Feedback receptivity (Figure 8-7) is seen as a multi-dimensional construct, in which message properties, implicated 'depth' and existing self-concept all play a part. This conceptualisation of 'receptivity' therefore avoids labelling feedback recipients in an overly simplistic or binary way.

The practical implications of the study conclusions for stakeholders are further elaborated in Section 9.3 below.

9.2 Reflections on methodology

9.2.1 Strengths, limitations and challenges of the research

Pragmatic and Constructivist perspectives informed the approach to this research study. From the Pragmatic perspective, value and relevance of research products are ultimately judged by the practical utility to those in the field. I believe that the research products from this study offer original contributions to knowledge, with the potential to inform and guide practice. From this stance, research products must be seen as 'provisional warranted assertions', which may be extensible to other contexts if found to be effective repeatedly.

Throughout this study, I have attempted to take the 'experience of participants seriously' (Stacey and Griffin, 2005) by staying close to the data and building theory 'bottom-up' out of the data. I believe by demonstrating transparency of method and rigour of enactment that I have shown faithfulness to the experience of participants and their voices have been clearly presented in the findings. This research has produced a rich and detailed contextualised interpretations of participant accounts, which I believe are credible and likely to have a high degree of resonance with practitioners.

Inevitably these interpretations are personal, filtered through my own experiences and biases, and no claims to directly representing participants lived experience can be made (Willig, 2001). Research outcomes must, therefore, be seen as my interpretation of the participants' own interpretation of their realities – the so-called 'double hermeneutic' (Giddens, 1987) in action. Constructivist versions of Grounded Theory (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014) invite the researcher to understand how they co-participate in the research process and shape research outputs. I believe that transparency regarding my position as a researcher, the extent and direction of my impact can be gauged.

All research methods represent a balance between practical realities and theoretical demands, inevitably falling short in some respect (Smith, 2008). Unexpected challenges require modification of research design and occasional compromises. Limitations of this research included:

- *Access to participants* – while it was an obvious benefit to be given access to very senior leaders within a single organisational context, access to them and at times that suited the research process proved challenging. For example, while the leaders were willing to give time for an initial interview, they were less willing to give time for a follow-up conversation. I was, therefore, unable to confirm my analyses with them as initially intended. The research was also considerably delayed by changes in company ownership and Group HR personnel, making the identification of additional leader participants difficult, and constrained access to potential provider interviewees. However, the in-depth interviews with the 24 participants provided rich, detailed and nuanced accounts of their lived experiences on which to base the analysis.

- *Sampling and saturation strategy*. Access issues to participants also meant that the transition from purposive sampling to theoretical sampling was an impossibility. Instead, saturation was achieved by monitoring the evolution of coding structures and memos, and comparisons of insights emerging between participants and across participant groups. It was, therefore, possible to track when no new information arose from the data, and repetitive themes were recognisable. This method of code monitoring appears to be a novel contribution to research practice.

- *Nature of participant accounts* – this study chose to focus on feedback incidents that had been particularly memorable to participants, and no claims can therefore be made to either their accuracy or typicality. It is also recognised that incident recall may well have been filtered by factors such as social desirability and that incidents of feedback rejection may therefore have been under-represented. The full expression of meaning may also have been inhibited for those participants speaking in their second language. However, as all participants were fluent in English, this latter effect may have been minimal.

In particular, the following aspects of the research process were practically and theoretically challenging:

- *Deploying mixed-methods* -The ‘incompatibilist’ stance described above suggests that combining qualitative and quantitative data is paradigmatically impossible (Guba, 1990).

However, the pragmatic stance suggests that research design should be informed by 'end-in-mind' and 'what works' and that both forms of data can have a place in answering research questions. In terms of this study, I would argue that appropriate use was made of different forms of data to address different aspects of the study. Quantitative data (see Chapter 4: Leader results), was used only to provide contextual information (i.e. descriptive statistics), in which to situate the study and inform the design of in-depth interviews. Had this quantitative data been used to generate hypotheses, it could legitimately be argued that this could have tainted the analysis of the qualitative data, with the risk of a predetermined meaning being imposed upon it. There was also a risk that the leader interviewees may have been coloured by participants completing the survey questionnaire in advance. However, I am satisfied that sufficient time elapsed between the survey and interviews for this to be unlikely.

- *Deploying pragmatically informed research*. The pragmatic standpoint had provided a useful stance to inform this research, avoiding the extremes of the realist/relativist positions. However, my training in positivism and constructivism was not easily silenced, requiring me repeatedly to reconsider my position regarding concepts such as 'rigour', 'interpretation' and 'objectivity'. The desire to make sense of the data was strong throughout, and I found myself having to return repeatedly to the data to ensure my theorising was securely grounded in the data rather than in my imagination.

- *Quality criteria for pragmatically informed research.* As discussed in Chapter 3, pragmatically informed research methods have yet to evolve distinct criteria to evaluate its products, other than that of 'usefulness' to research audiences, and risks being perceived as an 'anything goes' approach. However, I would argue that it was unnecessary to invent separate evaluation criteria, as suggested by some authors (Jayanti, 2011), as long as credible and epistemologically consistent criteria are employed.

- *Effective engagement with the literature.* Classic GTM advocates delayed engagement with the literature in order that the researcher's influence on the analysis process is minimised. However, I agree with Bryant's position that this is paradoxical in that researchers '*need to demonstrate familiarity with the existing literature as a basis for justifying the innovative potential of their proposed research*' (Bryant, 2017: 104). Engagement with the literature has therefore been a continuous rather than discrete process, running in parallel with data collection and analysis. I would also note that managing and analysing the volumes of emergent literature has been one of the more practically challenging aspects of the study. Use of Endnote proved a double-edged sword, useful in that it provided a home for materials, but unhelpful in that facilitated passive collection of materials rather than the active distillation of literature themes.

9.2.2 Directions for future research

From a design perspective, this study would ideally have been devised to study particular recipient-provider pairings; however, this proved impractical in the context. A study of matched pairs would therefore be valuable to compare perceptions of the same feedback conversations and views of resultant outcomes, as well as explore in greater depth the dynamics and effects played out in particular relationships. This study was also not designed to study typical feedback conversations so much as focus on memorable incidents. Further work is therefore required to establish typical leader experiences as well as establish the extent of use of particular feedback tools in organisations and by coaches. Further, the study was also not designed to explore the effects of developmental feedback over time, even if the study surfaced the longevity of powerful feedback experiences. While there are some longitudinal studies of upward feedback effects (Smither et al., 1995), there is little as yet which looks at this from the recipient perspective or indeed considers the effects of other types of development feedback over time.

Aside from these potential limitations, I believe the findings of this study open up many potential avenues for future qualitative and quantitative research. In particular, this study has highlighted several areas of potential theoretical and practical importance. For example, while this study focused on the experience of participants, it also indicated the considerable influence of the broader organisational discourse and dominant patterns in the organisation's feedback 'culture'. Patterns of organisational discourse within and across organisations are, therefore, an unexplored aspect of the literature. In particular, it may have considerable relevance to explore the voices of commissioning stakeholders and their expectations of feedback providers. Such a study would, therefore, provide a greater understanding of the contexts in which feedback conversations take place, as well as potentially inform the design of organisational development interventions.

The study also suggested some distinct patterns of behaviours/ assumptions amongst feedback participants. Further (quantitative) research would be needed to confirm these patterns and establish their effects and understand participant drivers and motivations. In particular, differences in provider 'stance' highlighted potential ethical issues but the study did not explore this facet of the topic as an explicit focus. Research within provider groups would, therefore, be valuable to establish the extent of such issues and explore how they are perceived and managed by providers. In particular, it would be worthwhile to explore further the complexity of boundary management issues experienced by HR professionals and the support they received in managing them.

From the recipient perspective, the study suggested a divide in situations where the recipient had an element of choice or volition in receiving feedback and where they had none. This indicated very different patterns of response to feedback and subsequent outcomes. Further research into recipient volition may therefore prove a fruitful avenue for further work. While there is some literature in this area regarding feedback-seeking behaviours (Milward-Purvis et al., 2010), there is little specific research regarding the effect of personal volition or when feedback is given within remedial contexts.

By design, this study did not constrain participants to talk about a single type of feedback; however, it would be useful for future studies to contrast perspectives and experiences of particular types of feedback, especially those in everyday use for developmental purposes. In particular, further research is required into participant perceptions of psychometrics and personality assessments as this study has indicated this as an area of potential contention and misalignment. While studies have shown a positive relationship between use of 360º/ multi-rater feedback and use of coaching, there is more limited research into the combined efficacy of coaching with psychometric assessments and other forms of personality instrument.

The leader findings also suggested an ambivalent relationship to feedback that was purely positive and affirmative. Given the recent growth in strengths-based assessments and strengths-based coaching, this would suggest a better understanding of this area may be required. The study also indicated that ‘in the moment’ feedback was often conflated with advice-giving, personal opinion and judgements. Further research would, therefore, inform the extent of these practices and how coaches reconcile this with their coaching stance and practice. It is assumed by authors (O'Neill, 2000) that ‘in the moment’ feedback is relevant to the client's real-world patterns of behaviour and therefore legitimised as a form of intervention. To date, this appears to be an underexplored area meriting further investigation.

9.3 Implications and recommendations for stakeholders

I have argued above that feedback conversations are heavily conditioned by the norms of the context in which they are held and are dominated by deterministic/mechanistic assumptions. While these assumptions remain in place, it could be argued that the dominant patterns of discourse and behaviour revealed by the study will remain in place and even be reinforced. However, and more optimistically, complexity theorists suggest (Eoyang and Holladay, 2013) that change at the global level is possible by accumulative shifts in behaviour and thought at the local level. The balance of this section makes recommendations for shifting feedback conversation, at the level of the individual participants and the level of the organisation. Recommendations for changing feedback discourse amongst the wider coaching community are also made.

9.3.1 Individual provider implications (Internal and external coaches, HR professionals, L&D professionals)

Contracting explicitly for feedback

While there was some evidence of contracting for feedback and challenge, this was an area where increased rigour and clarity would have been beneficial, particularly for HR participants. For example, whilst given under the banner of development, much of the feedback was given primarily for corrective/ remedial reasons, but without full transparency of that purpose. Explicit discussion regarding the organisational contract and associated stakeholder expectations would at least set the relationship in its proper context and avoid misunderstandings. Evidence also suggested that boundary issues were not well understood and often poorly managed. Clarity regarding confidentiality and data sharing would, therefore, enhance practice.

Changing ways of working

The complexity perspective challenges feedback providers to reconceive their role as an implicated participant and co-inquirer with the recipient into the interpretation of feedback. This perspective implies a potential shift in the power dynamics between providers and recipients towards more collaborative, dialogic ways of working. It also implies working with the recipient to support their meaning-making of feedback, and rather than imposing meaning upon them.

The complexity perspective also implies a dynamic and systemic way of working, which avoids labelling recipients as ‘open’ or ‘closed’ or problematising them as ‘resistant’ or ‘difficult’. Instead, it implies a view of recipients as ‘in process’, constantly negotiating competing internal and external demands, and continually moving through cycles of self-reinforcement and self-reformation. The model presented in Figure 8-6 suggests a range of ways of working are necessary to meet recipients’ developmental needs, implying the need to select style and approach depending on the situation rather than personal preference or habit.

Some of the more experienced coach providers saw part of their role as modelling feedback reception in order to teach leaders how to give it to others. I would extend this idea and propose that providers also have a role in teaching leaders how to tolerate discrepant feedback, and thereby extend their willingness to seek feedback from others. Attention to creating conditions of psychological safety and trust between participants is therefore crucial if extreme dissonant reactions are to be avoided. The study also indicated the providers must, on occasion, be willing to amplify dissonance levels, particularly when recipients are inclined to dismiss feedback as irrelevant or to avoid difficult messages.

Training and support for providers

It was apparent that none of the feedback providers had any formal knowledge of feedback theories. However, many had received training in giving feedback, usually from learning how to debrief psychometric reports. Enlarging understanding of the multiple perspectives and models available would enhance providers' ability to choose an appropriate stance and role with their clients. Additionally, while some coach training requires explicit exploration of their coaching model, the equivalent reflexive process does not exist for feedback provision. Conscious awareness of individual feedback 'stance' and the assumptions that inform it, would therefore increase the range of choices to providers and sensitise them to the potential ethical traps to which they may be prone.

The data suggested that many feedback situations are difficult (for both parties); however, there was no indication that providers gained support from supervision to help them deal with these situations. Coach supervisors, therefore, have a potential role in supporting providers to deal with the emotional burdens of feedback provision, as well as reflecting on and flexing ways of working.

Reconsidering the use of tools

The findings also imply a reconsideration of the types of tools used by providers. It has been argued (Western, 2012) that feedback tools are as much for the benefit of providers as recipients and distort the working relationship. From the position of safe and ethical practice, it behoves providers to understand why they are using tools, as well as appreciate their limitations and best uses. This includes thoroughly understanding the theoretical constructs on which instruments are based, the norm bases used to derive comparative results, the validity and reliability of the information they generate, and what constitutes an appropriate interpretation of results.

9.3.2 Individual recipient implications (Leaders and managers)

Being an active and informed consumer

The data indicated that recipients did little to stipulate the sorts of feedback they were interested in or the type of conversation they were interested in engaging. This relative passivity suggests that recipients could do more to initiate and shape feedback conversation in order to ensure outcomes of value. In a similar vein, recipients may need to be more informed and aware of the interpretive limits of tools (particularly psychometrics and assessments) in order to assess their value and implications.

Using the feedback provider as an ally and resource

The findings suggested that on occasion, an adversarial relationship between providers and recipients developed during the feedback conversation. Recipients may therefore get better value from feedback conversations if they can see providers as an ally and resource for their development. This implies that recipients may need to be more active in contracting the relationship with the provider, and actively shaping the type of alliance that would be most helpful to them.

Increasing feedback-seeking

Complexity perspectives encourage feedback-seeking by leaders, particularly from within the contexts they operate, and from a wide diversity of sources. This implies an increased focus by leaders on seeking out feedback from their social networks, formally and informally, and perhaps less emphasis on giving feedback to others. Coaches may, therefore, be better employed in encouraging leaders in this direction and supporting them to develop strategies to collect such information.

9.3.3 Organisational recommendations (HRD and Organisational development professionals)

A complexity perspective suggests that a particular feedback 'culture' cannot be engineered but can only be influenced by altering the conditions which constrain and enable feedback conversations at the local level. The following recommendations are designed to increase the quantity and quality of feedback shared and to ensure that feedback is relevant to the context in which leaders operate.

Encouraging feedback-seeking

While the study organisation emphasised the value of managers giving feedback, little emphasis was given to feedback-seeking, and there was a belief, by some, that seeking feedback would be interpreted as a sign of weakness or neediness by senior management. There were also strong beliefs that upward feedback to senior managers would not be regarded positively. I would argue that these narratives might be modified by senior managers modelling feedback seeking behaviours, and explicitly recognising those that do. Further, selecting leaders on their willingness to seek out and give feedback would be a clear signal to the organisation that these sort of behaviours were valued and encouraged. These shifts in practice might, therefore, encourage changes in feedback-seeking ‘norms’ and create the conditions in which feedback can be discussed productively.

Reviewing feedback practices

While the Group HR function placed great stress on the importance of performance management conversations, the evidence suggested these were variably enacted. The study suggested that while leaders found the time for regular task-related conversation, the quantity and quality of development-related conversation was highly dependent on individual interests and priorities. Existing attempts to engineer these conversations (as a subset of performance management discussions) for the better appeared to be ineffective, and the motives and purposes often confused. A review of the performance management process would, therefore, be indicated, with a clearer separation of task and development conversations. Training in how to hold development conversations was also indicated as several leaders indicated this was not a process they were comfortable with or fully understood.

The study also suggests there may be potential to reconsider the use of 360º/ multi-rater feedback as a development tool. While almost universally seen as useful and relevant, most participants only appeared to pay attention to the verbatim comment component. Consequently, it is recommended that this element is enhanced and that follow-up conversations with raters built into the debrief process wherever possible. However, 360º/ multi-rater feedback should not be used as a substitute for direct feedback between management layers or avoidance of difficult conversations.

Creating feedback-rich development events

Leadership development training programmes present a unique opportunity to provide participants with feedback from multiple and diverse sources and therefore extend the quality and quantity of data available to leaders. In particular, 'peer stranger' feedback appeared to be an under-utilised source of highly credible feedback with impact on participants which could be further leveraged. However, whilst valuable, feedback engineered on training programmes does not constitute a substitute for regular and direct feedback from within a leader's immediate work environment and network.

9.3.4 Coaching professional bodies and training providers.

Providing feedback to coaching clients is a ubiquitous yet 'taken for granted' aspect of practice. Despite its apparent centrality in many coaches' practice, training in providing feedback appears left to chance or the providers of psychometric instruments. There is, therefore, considerable scope for training bodies to provide more in-depth education and skilling in feedback practices. In particular, the theoretical assumptions that inform feedback practice should be more widely known and understood in order to challenge implicit assumptions which appear to inform practice.

As the coaching world strives towards greater professionalisation, the coaching bodies have a direct responsibility to raise standards by encouraging best practices and sanctioning questionable practices. I would argue that best practice in this area is inadequately articulated by the coaching bodies, and insufficiently represented in their codes of practice, (Association of Coaching, 2012) and competency models. The coaching world cannot afford to continue to assume that feedback is always beneficial and of developmental value to recipients. The professional bodies, therefore, have a role to play in refreshing the debates in this area, looking in particular at the premises that underpin feedback use, the effects on client relationships and the associated ethical challenges. This latter point also implies that coaching supervisors have a role to play in improving practices in this area and need to be alert to ways in which their coaching supervisees choose to deploy feedback, as well as the potential emotional costs involved.

9.4 Personal reflections on the research journey

This has been a longer than expected journey. Maintaining momentum, interest and focus over seven years has been a significant challenge and a substantial drain on my emotional, practical and financial resources. It has also been a journey of unexpected delights and surprising turns, in which new facets continually emerged and constantly challenged my preconceptions and assumptions of the topic. Looking back, I suspect my motives to learn more about feedback conversations were inspired more by my 'positivist self' than my 'interpretivist' self. This latent tendency that has led me up many blind alleys during the research and probably prolonged the length of the journey. The desire to explain why people respond to feedback has gradually and unconsciously been replaced with a fuller appreciation of the diversity and complexity of experience and practice. I have also learnt to reign in my tendency to over-interpret and remain grounded and connected to the data. In short, I have become a nascent qualitative researcher.

The research process has also had a considerable impact on my practice as a coach and leadership development specialist. I no longer prize instruments in the way I used to and have stopped using such tools automatically with clients. I have learnt to think more about how to help clients build their own interpretations of feedback and to explore the contexts from which that data comes from rather than accepting it at face value. I am also far more aware of the power dynamics in my coaching relationships, and how this is shared and negotiated with my clients. I have learnt to design leadership development programmes that maximise the opportunities for unmediated feedback, and which provide sufficient emotional safety for it to be absorbed. As a result, my practice has become enriched, more systemic, and I believe consequently of greater value to my clients.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Initial survey to past attendees of XYX leadership programme

Feedback for development: Introduction

XYZ Plc has agreed to participate in a Doctoral research study with Oxford Brookes University to investigate experiences of receiving feedback - specifically feedback intended to shape your development as a leader. This study will inform how we support and shape leadership development activities in the future.

In this context, 'feedback' is defined as messages/ information from others about how you are perceived or experienced as a leader.

The following short survey should take at most 15 minutes to complete. In it, you will be asked to recall and answer questions on 1-3 instances of memorable feedback you have received in the last year. As with most survey's your first response is probably your best, so please don't dwell on any of the questions.

Following on from this survey, a sample of leaders will be selected for interview. If you would like to participate further as a research interviewee, please indicate your interest by entering your email address at the end of the questionnaire.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey - it is much appreciated

Section One: About you

First, please tell us a little bit about yourself:

* 1. Are you male or female?

◯ Male ◯ Female

* 2. Which category below includes your age?

◯ 20 or younger ◯ 21-29 ◯ 30-39 ◯ 40-49 ◯ 50-59 ◯ 60 or older

* 3. Which country are you based in?

Country: [ ]

Section Two: Sources of memorable feedback received

For questions on this page, we would like you to think about the sources of feedback you have received in the last 12 months.

* 4. Please rank the sources of feedback you have received in terms of their memorability. (1 = most memorable).

Please use N/A to deselect sources that are not applicable to you.

- ◯ 360º/ multi-rater feedback
- ◯ Development (or assessment) centre
- ◯ Psychometric or personality assessment (e.g. MBTI, Facet 5, FIRO-B etc.)
- ◯ From a coach or mentor
- ◯ From a line manager or superior
- ◯ From a peer or colleague
- ◯ From a team member or subordinate
- ◯ On a training course
- ◯ On a team development event
- ◯ From family or friends
- ◯ Other

5. If you have included 'other' above, could you briefly describe this additional source?

Section Three: Most Memorable Feedback Instance

Now thinking more specifically, on this page, please answer the questions in relation to the most memorable instance of feedback you received in the past 12 months

* 6. Was this piece of feedback sought out by you, or instigated by others

- ○ Instigated by me
- ○ Jointly instigated
- ○ Instigated by others
- ○ Can't recall

* 7. What was the relative balance of positive/negative messages in this specific feedback?

- ○ All positive
- ○ Mostly positive
- ○ Somewhat positive
- ○ Somewhat negative
- ○ Mostly negative
- ○ All negative

* 8. To what extent did you agree with this piece of feedback?

- ○ Totally agreed
- ○ Mostly agreed
- ○ Somewhat agreed
- ○ Somewhat disagreed
- ○ Mostly disagreed
- ○ Totally disagreed

* 9. To what extent did this piece of feedback surprise you?

- ○ Complete surprise
- ○ Mostly a surprise
- ○ Somewhat surprising
- ○ Somewhat unsurprising
- ○ Mostly unsurprising
- ○ Completely unsurprising

10. To what extent has this piece of feedback lead to a desire to change?

- No desire to change
- Small desire to change
- Moderate desire to change
- Desire to change
- Strong desire to change

* 11. To what extent has this piece of feedback materialised in a change?

- Not at all
- To a limited extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a great extent

* 12. Is there another instance of memorable feedback you can recall?

- Yes [If Yes , software directed the respondent to question 13]
- No [If No, software directed the respondent to question 27]

Second Memorable Feedback Instance

On this page answer the questions in relation to the second most memorable feedback instance

* 13. Was this piece of feedback sought out by you, or instigated by others

- Instigated by me
- Jointly instigated
- Instigated by others
- Can't recall

* 14. What was the relative balance of positive/negative messages in this specific feedback?

- All positive

- Mostly positive
- Somewhat positive
- Somewhat negative
- Mostly negative
- All negative

* 15. To what extent did you agree with this piece of feedback?

- Totally agreed
- Mostly agreed
- Somewhat agreed
- Somewhat disagreed
- Mostly disagreed
- Totally disagreed

* 16. To what extent did this piece of feedback surprise you?

- Complete surprise
- Mostly a surprise
- Somewhat surprising
- Somewhat unsurprising
- Mostly unsurprising
- Completely unsurprising

17. To what extent has this piece of feedback lead to a desire to change?

- No desire to change
- Small desire to change
- Moderate desire to change
- Desire to change
- Strong desire to change

* 18. To what extent has this piece of feedback materialised in a change?

- Not at all

◯ To a limited extent

◯ To a moderate extent

◯ To a great extent

* 19. Is there another instance of memorable feedback you can recall?

◯ Yes [If Yes , software directed respondent to question 20]

◯ No [If No, software directed respondent to question 27]

Third Memorable Feedback Instance

Please answer the questions on this page in relation to the third most memorable feedback instance

* 20. Was this piece of feedback sought out by you, or instigated by others

◯ Instigated by me

◯ Jointly instigated

◯ Instigated by others

◯ Can't recall

* 21. What was the relative balance of positive/negative messages in this specific feedback?

◯ All positive

◯ Mostly positive

◯ Somewhat positive

◯ Somewhat negative

◯ Mostly negative

◯ All negative

* 22. To what extent did you agree with this piece of feedback?

◯ Totally agreed

◯ Mostly agreed

◯ Somewhat agreed

◯ Somewhat disagreed

- Mostly disagreed
- Totally disagreed

* 23. To what extent did this piece of feedback surprise you?

- Complete surprise
- Mostly a surprise
- Somewhat surprising
- Somewhat unsurprising
- Mostly unsurprising
- Completely unsurprising

24. To what extent has this piece of feedback lead to a desire to change?

- No desire to change
- Small desire to change
- Moderate desire to change
- Desire to change
- Strong desire to change

* 25. To what extent has this piece of feedback materialised in a change?

- Not at all
- To a limited extent
- To a moderate extent
- To a great extent

Section Four: Role of feedback in your development

* 26. Thinking more generally now, how do you see the role of feedback in your development as a leader?

Section Five: Research Participation

* 27. Would you be willing to participate in a short research interview to explore your experiences of receiving feedback further?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe -send me more information

☐ No

28. Please enter your email address if you have answered 'Yes/Maybe' above

I will forward you an information sheet describing the project in full so that you can make an informed decision whether to participate. Thank you for your interest.

* 29. Would you like a copy of the survey results?

☐ Yes ☐ No

30. Please enter your email address if you have answered 'Yes' above

I will forward you a copy of the survey results once they have been collated and analysed. Thank you for your interest

Alison Maxwell, Doctoral Student, Oxford Brookes University

Appendix 2 Research study information sheet – coach version

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

Business School - Faculty of Business
Study title: Giving and receiving feedback for development in a leadership context

Dear coach,

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study to share your experiences of delivering developmental feedback to leaders. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important why the study is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

Leaders are typically bombarded with feedback, some of it directly aimed at enhancing performance (e.g. performance appraisals), some of it more generally directed at leader development and self-awareness (e.g. 360º/ multi-rater feedback, development centre feedback, psychometric feedback, coach feedback etc.).

This study is focusing on how feedback participants (i.e. recipients and providers) experience and make sense of developmental feedback. In this context, developmental feedback is defined as 'information/ messages from others in the organisation intended to inform a leaders development'. Feedback for development may therefore be part of a planned organisational event (e.g. as part of a training course), or, at the other extreme, 'in the moment' comment received from a coach.

Why have I been invited to participate?

You have been invited to participate as a professional coach who has considerable experience of delivering feedback for leader development. In total c.6 professional coaches are being invited to participate.

Deciding to take part?

Taking part in the research is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you do decide to take part, you may withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If you do decide to withdraw any unprocessed data gathered will be removed from the study and destroyed.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be asked to take part in an interview (c. 60 min), which will be audio recorded. Interviews will be held at a time of your convenience and may be face to face, by phone or over Skype/ Facetime. The interview questions will be about your experience of delivering feedback and what changes may have occurred subsequently, and you will not be asked to share anything of a personal or confidential nature. A summary of the interview themes will be returned to you for verification.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The study potentially provides insight into how leaders make sense of feedback and translate this into changes in the workplace. As many organisations invest substantially in feedback interventions, the results of the study may help to inform how these are designed and delivered. The study will also contribute to our understanding of leadership development and more broadly, adult change and development. Participating in the interview may also help you to reflect on your personal experience of delivering feedback and your practice in this area.

What are the potential risks of taking part?

In considering your experiences of feedback, you may identify sensitive issues, which you would like to discuss further. In this case and by request, I would offer an additional session to explore this further.

Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?

All information collected will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations) and your confidentiality, privacy and anonymity will be ensured in the collection, storage and publication of research material. For example, individual contributions will not be identified by name, and a code will be used to identify participants e.g. ‘Coach 3’. If you agree to any quotes being used, these will be under a pseudonym.

All data will be stored in a secure manner on a password-protected computer. Data generated by the study will be retained in accordance with the University's policy on Academic Integrity. All data (paper or electronic) generated in the course of the research will be kept securely for a period of ten years after the completion of a research project.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you are willing to participate, please email me at alimax55@outlook.com marked ‘Feedback research’ and I will email you a consent form for completion and arrange an interview date and location that is convenient to you.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the study will, in the first instance, be published as a PhD thesis, copies of which will be held in the University library. The results may, at a later date, be published in relevant academic journals. A synopsis of the research finding will be provided as a matter of courtesy to all participants.

Who is organising and funding the research?

I am conducting the research as a Ph.D. student at Oxford Brookes University, Business School, Faculty of Business, and am self-funding.

Who has reviewed the study?

The research study has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee, Oxford Brookes University, and has the full support of XYZ Plc.

Further Information?

If you require further information or detail, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be contacted on +44(0)1780 480287 or alimax55@outlook.com. In addition, you are welcome to contact my academic supervisory team at Oxford Brookes: Professor Tatiana Bachkirova (tbachkirova@brookes.ac.uk), or Dr Peter Jackson (peter.jackson@brookes.ac.uk).

If at any point, you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, you should contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee on ethics@brookes.ac.uk.

I would be delighted to work with you on this important subject, however, if you decide not to take part, I fully respect that decision. In any case, thank you for taking the time to read this briefing document.

Alison Maxwell
E: alimax55@outlook.com
T: +44(0) 1780 480 287
S: alisonmaxwell

Appendix 3 Sample consent form

CONSENT FORM

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

Research Project: Feedback for development

Researcher :

Alison Maxwell
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Wheatley Campus
Wheatley
Oxford, OX33 1HX

E: 11121460@brookes.ac.uk
T: +44(0)1780-480287
S: alisonmaxwell
FT: info@alisonmaxwell.com

Please initial box

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. I understand I may withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied. ☐

I understand that my data will be anonymised using a code to protect confidentiality. However, I am aware that confidentiality can only be protected within the limitations of the law, and in small sample studies, there is a possibility of individual contributions being identified. ☐

I understand that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised) in a specialist data centre and may be used for future research. ☐

Please tick box

	Yes	No
I agree to the interviews being audio recorded.	☐	☐
I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications.	☐	☐
I agree to take part in the above study.	☐	☐

__________________ ____________ ________________

Name of Participant Date Signature

Alison Maxwell

__________________ ____________ ________________

Name of Researcher Date Signature

Appendix 4 Initial design of interview question protocol for leader interviews

Section One: Introduction to the interview

- Scope and purpose of research
- Definition of 'developmental feedback'
- Overview of the interview process
- Ethics & confidentiality; agreement to take part in the study, any specific confidentiality requirements, check consent form completed and returned.

Section 2: Interview Questions – experiences of developmental feedback

Part One Opener: Tell me in as much detail as you can about a recent experience when you received feedback on your leadership which lead to a change of some sort

Follow up prompt questions:

Context/ format:

- What was the context for this feedback? What type of feedback was this?
- Was this something sought out by you or instigated by others?
- Who was giving the feedback? How did they handle the feedback session?

Content

- What were the key messages coming out of the session for you?
- What was the balance of negative/positive messages?

Response to feedback

- How did you react to the feedback – what was going on for you?
- What part of the message did you buy-in to and why?
- What parts surprised you? What parts didn't surprise you?
- To what extent have you heard these messages before?
- Was there any part of the feedback that you resisted or couldn't agree with fully?

Translation into action and change

- How did this feedback motivate you to make a change in your leadership?
- How have you acted on this feedback?
- What changes in your leadership has this led to?
- How have you sustained this change?

Residual effects

- What questions has this left you with?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add about that experience?

Part Two Opener: Tell me in as much detail as you can about a recent experience when you received feedback on your leadership which didn't lead to any particular change

Follow up prompt questions:

Context/ format:

- What was the context for this feedback? What type of feedback was this?
- Was this something sought out by you or instigated by others?
- Who was giving the feedback? How did they handle the feedback session?

Content

- What were the key messages coming out of the session for you?
- How did the balance of negative/positive messages compare with your first instance?

Response to feedback

- How did you react to the feedback – what was going on for you? How did this compare to your first incident?
- What part of the message did you disagree with and why?
- What part of the message did you buy-in to and why?
- What parts surprised you? What parts didn't surprise you?
- To what extent have you heard these messages before?

Translation into action and change

- Comparing this with your first instance, why do you think this particular feedback lead to less/no action and change
- Looking back on this instance is there any part of the message which now resonates for you.

Residual effects

- What questions has this particular experience left you with?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add about that experience?
- Looking back, what sense have you made of these two experiences now?

Section 3: Leader Profile/ demographics

- Age band (20's, 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's)
- Gender: M/F
- Current role /position
- Years working for XYZ
- Location and first language

Appendix 5 Initial design of interview question protocol for HR/coach interviews

Section One : introduction

- Thank for participation
- Scope and purpose of research
- Definition of 'developmental feedback'
- Overview of the interview process, agenda and time requirements
- Ethics & confidentiality; agreement to take part in the study, any specific confidentiality requirements, check consent form completed and returned.

Section Two : Participant Demographics

- Age band (20's, 30's, 40's, 50's, 60's)
- Gender: M/F
- Current role / position (if an internal)
- Years working for or with XYZ
- Location and first language
- Capacity/ context for giving feedback to leaders in XYZ. Level of leader worked with
- Formal training in giving feedback

Section Three: Experiences of giving developmental feedback

Part One Opener: Tell me in as much detail as you can about a recent experience when you gave developmental feedback to a leader which really landed with them and resulted in change.

- What made that story stand out for you?
- What was going on for you?

  -

Part Two Opener: tell me about an instance when you gave feedback that didn't land/didn't result in a change

- what made that story stand out for you?
- What was going on for you

Comparison of incidents

- What made the difference in these two stories?
- What conditions make the difference in how feedback is received?

Section Three: Preparation to give feedback

- How do you typically prepare to give feedback?
- How do you know what to expect when coming into a session?

Section Four: Beliefs re feedback

- What is it you believe about feedback in relation to leader development?
- What is important to you about how you give feedback? What guides you?
- How do you choose what to say /not to say? What is legitimate territory, and what is not?
- Are there any particular theories or models that guide your practice?
- How do you define 'self-awareness'?

Section Five: Organisational context

- How would you describe the XYZ feedback culture?
- What is the best/worst practice?
- What is HR's role in this?

Section Six: Close

- What else would you like to say about this topic
- Offer a summary of findings on completion
- Thank for participation

Appendix 6 Incident log – leader interviews

Key: Immediate/ rapid acceptance | Delayed acceptance | Rejection of feedback

Ref	Source/ type of feedback	Relationship with provider	Feedback characteristics/ valence	Experience of receiving	Responses	• Resultant change
L1-2	Boss Spontaneous comment	Long Trusting Respected	Positive Authentic Positive intent	Affirmative Non-directive	Accepting Emotion – being trusted	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Practical changes to approach
L1-3	Boss Spontaneous comment	Long Trusting Respected	Positive Authentic Positive intent	Affirmative of person Confronting	Surprise Accepting	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Re-alignment of self-image
L1-5	Doctor Spontaneous comment	Trusted expert source Impartial source	Critical with supportive intent	Confronting	Accepting	• Practical changes to approach
L2-1	Peer stranger, on training programme	Respected Credible Short relationship No bias	Critical message Direct	Confronting – behaviours / approach	Accepting - Logical Somatic	• Practical changes to approach

L2-2	Mentor Ad hoc comment	Respected Long relationship	Positive	Affirmation of approach	Accepting Emotional	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach
L3-1	Peer stranger on training programme	Short but trusting relationship No bias Psychological safety Respected	Positive Positive intent Authentic	Affirmation of person	Surprise Logical Emotional Somatic	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Practical changes to approach • Re-alignment of self-image
L1-1	Boss Spontaneous comment	Long Trusting Respected	Positive Authentic Positive intent	Confronting/direct Affirmative Accumulating	Accepting after repetition	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Practical changes to approach
L1-4	360/ multi-rater Facilitated	Trusted HR colleague delivering for team	All positive Consistency of message Positive intent Caringly delivered	Affirmative Accumulating c Confronting	Surprise but distrust of positives	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Practical changes to approach • Re-alignment of self-image
L4-1	360 debrief	Delivered by HR	Critical Authentic	Conflicting – acting contrary to own values	Surprise	• Sensitised to impact on others • Practical changes to approach

L4-2	Boss	Respected Direct	Critical Directive to 'stop fighting'	Confronting – ultimatum	Logical	• Practical changes to approach
L5-1	Subordinate complaint via boss	Indirect	Critical – complaint re behaviour	Conflicting – with own self- view/ values Confronting	Surprise - Defensive Emotion	• Sensitised to impact on others • Practical changes to approach
L5-2	360/ multi-rater	Delivered via coach	Positive/ No change required	Affirmative of self Confirmative	Accepting Logical	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach
L5-5	Former boss	Long, trusting relationship	Positive	Affirmative – of self complimentary	Emotional Part rejected	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach
L6-1	180 multi-rater Sought feedback	F2F with team members	Mixed – mainly positive but remembers the criticism	Affirmative of self Confirmative of approach Accumulating Conflicting with self-image	Surprise Emotion Defensive	• Sensitised to impact on others • Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Practical changes to approach
L6-2	Development centre	HR/ externally facilitated	Mixed In depth	Objective/ scientific	Accepting	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach

L6-4	Boss	Respected Big relationship	Mixed Reciprocal Authentic	Challenging and supportive of self	Accepting	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach
L7-2	Peer (HR)	Respected Deep relationship Coaching relationship	Mixed Challenging Reciprocal Authentic	Challenging	Logical Accepting	• Practical changes to approach
L7-3	360 as part of a training programme	Welcoming diverse views Respected	Mixed – mainly positive but remembers the criticism	Challenging approach – forced reflection Confirmation	Accepting – recognising Emotion – painful, surprise	• Sensitised to impact on others
L8-1	Peer stranger on training programme	Respected, senior, impartial stranger	Positive Authentic, supportive, challenging, direct	Affirming of self Accepting – a realisation Challenging?	Accepting: Somatic Forcing a decision Emotional – inspirational	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Practical changes to approach • Re-alignment of self-image
L8 -2	Peer strangers on training programme	Respected, senior, impartial peer	Positive	Affirmative of self Accumulating Challenging	Reflecting: Emotion – encouraging, enlightening Logical – making a decision, turning point	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Practical changes to approach • Re-alignment of self-image

L8-4	Internal Mentor	Distant relationship Respected	Mixed – critical - challenging	Confronting/ challenging / direct	Logical Emotion – insightful Cognitive – a realisation	• Practical changes to approach
L9-1	Peer Ad hoc comment	Respected Deep relationship Been on FED together	Critical Authentic – direct Permission to give feedback Reciprocal	Confronting of approach Conflicting	Initial denial Reflecting: Feeling – initial denial, surprise Somatic – sit back	• Sensitised to impact on others • Practical changes to approach
L9-2	Peer (HR) Ad hoc comment	Trusted relationship	Critical Permission to give feedback	Confronting of approach Accumulation	Cognitive - helpful	• Sensitised to impact on others • Practical changes to approach
L10-1	360 as part of a training programme	Welcoming diverse views	Mixed Familiar messages	Affirmative Accumulation – Confirmative	Recognition: Emotion – enlightening, Somatic – eye- opening Cognitive – making you think	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach • Practical changes to approach
L10-3	Subordinate ad hoc comment	Respected	Positive intent	Affirmative of self Confirmative	Somatic – touching, Emotion –profound	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach

L11-1	Development centre	Respect Welcoming diverse views	Mixed – experienced as constructive Positive intent Evidence-based	Confronting a gap in approach Confirmative i	Recognition	• Sensitised to impact on others • Practical changes to approach
L11-3	Boss (PDP)	Trust Respect	Positive – praised for direct approach	Affirmative of self Accumulating Confirmative	Emotion – relief,	• Strengthened sense of self/ approach
L12-1	Boss (PDP)	Short relationship Open exploration	Critical – advisory	Conflicting with own values/ self-image	Processing - Initial recognition Reflection –Logical -Rationalising values/ trade-off	• Sensitised to impact on others • Practical changes to approach
L12-2	Wife Ad hoc comment	Trust Deep relationship Impartiality Authentic – serious tone	Critical Evidenced Positive intent	Conflicting with own values/ self Confronting	Non-recognition initially	• Sensitised to impact on others • Practical changes to approach
L1-6	Colleague/Boss	Distrusted source – discrepant behaviour, not authentic	Positive/ complimentary	Affirmative of approach/self	Suspicion and rejection. Lacking honesty	Relationship deterioration
L2-3	360	Delivered by HR	Positive/ all complimentary	Affirmative but lacking criticality	Processing – no suggestions for change	No action

L2-4	Boss Indirect conversation	Distrusted (and disliked) source	Critical – imposed	Conflicting with own values/beliefs	Rejection	No change
L2-5	Boss	Distrusted	Critical	Conflicting with own logic/ beliefs	Rejected as illogical	Implemented own change in contradiction
L3-2	360	Team input	Positive – complimentary	Affirmative but lacking criticality Confirmative	Processing – rejected as lacking criticality	No change
L3-3	Annual appraisal from boss	Self-oriented boss	Positive Became about the boss – not development points	Confirmative Emotions – pleased & frustrated Logic – no link to consequences	Rejected for lack of criticality of specificity of development need	Lost confidence in the appraisal process
L4-3	Boss	Bosses behaviours not respected Long relationship	Critical/ directive/ threatening Abuse of power?	Confronting/ conflicting/ ultimatum	Rejected as against values	No change Deterioration in relationship
L4-4	Boss / PDP	No data	Positive - Formal performance review	Affirmative/ confirmative Uncritical	Rejected because of lack of honesty/ criticality	No change

L5-3	Ad hoc feedback seeing	Subordinates	All positive – no negative elements	Affirmative Confirmative	No change	No change
L5-4	Boss Ad hoc comment	No data	Critical – you should be…	Conflicting – with self-image	Rejected as incompatible with the sense of self	No change
L6-3	Bosses boss	Distant relationship	Critical	Conflicting – with sense of fairness	Rejected as unfair	No change
L7-4	Boss Ad hoc comment	Distant	Critical – an order	Conflicting – with own sense of appropriateness	Rejected as illogical	No change
L8-3	Boss/ PDP	Disliked, not respected Poor but long relationship	Critical	Conflicting with own values Demotivating	Rejected invitation to behaviour as the boss did	No change – deterioration of the relationship
L9-3	Psychometric	HR facilitator	As run up to ALDP	Forgettable	Rejected as unmemorable	No impact
L10-2	Psychometric	Distrusted source – Imposed	Mixed – took exception to assumption	Conflicting with own beliefs	Processing then rejection of a key premise	Low commitment to development areas.

L11-2	Boss at PDP	Respected	Critical –	Conflicting with own self-perception Lack of evidence	Checked out with peers then rejected	Ignored Relationship deterioration
L12-3	360/ Boss input	Poor relationship -	Critical –	Conflicting with own self-perception/ values	Rejected	Ignored
L12-4	Subordinate	No data	Critical	Conflicting with own self-perception-	Rejected	Rejected

Appendix 7 Incident log – HR interviews

Key: Immediate/ rapid acceptance | Delayed acceptance | Rejection of feedback

Ref.	**HR role**	**Relationship to recipient leader**	**Trigger for feedback**	**Mode of feedback – key message**				**Perceived response**
				Personal observation	360 debrief	Psychometric debrief	Development centre	
HR2-1	Specialist	HR stranger	Part of training event		Negative feedback from team			Immediate acceptance Previously unaware
HR3-1	Generalist	Peer -HR	Personal witness	Ineffective personal behaviour				Immediate acceptance Previously unaware
HR5-1	Generalist	HR rep.	Feedback seeking Known issue by others	Personal reputation and impact				Immediate acceptance Previously unaware
HR4-3	Specialist	Peer - HR	Part of training event		Exploration of strengths & weaknesses			Immediate acceptance Previously aware
HR1-1	Generalist	Direct report - HR Intermediary for others	Known issue by others Repeated discussion	Negative- Concern for impact on others				Delayed acceptance Previously aware
HR1-2	Generalist	Direct report - HR	Intermediary for others	Negative				Delayed acceptance Previously aware

			Known issue by others	Concern for impact on others				
HR3-3	Generalist	Line Manager	Feedback seeking Known issue by others	Ineffective personal behaviour				Delayed acceptance Previously aware
HR4-1	Specialist	HR stranger	Part of training event Known issue by others		Negative impact of behaviours on others			Delayed acceptance Previously unaware
HR4-4	Specialist	HR stranger	Part of training event		Negative criticism			Delayed acceptance Previously unaware
HR6-1	Specialist	HR stranger	Development centre				Negative impact of behaviours on others	Delayed acceptance Previously unaware
HR1-3	Generalist	Direct report - HR	Personal witness Intermediary for others	Advice on team development				No acceptance Previously aware
HR2-2	Specialist	HR stranger	Known issue by others Planned intervention		Negative impact of behaviours on others			No acceptance Previously aware
HR3-2	Generalist	Subordinate	Negative impact of	Negative impact of				No acceptance Previously unaware

			behaviours on the giver	behaviours on the giver				
HR4-2	Specialist	HR stranger	Part of training event		Critical element of 360 feedback			No acceptance Previously aware
HR4-5	Specialist	HR stranger	Part of training event			Challenge to validity of instrument		No acceptance Previously aware
HR5-2	Generalist	HR rep.	Known issue Intermediary for others	Negative impact of behaviours on others	Negative impact of behaviours on others			No acceptance Previously aware
HR6-2	Specialist	HR stranger	Part of training event		Negative impact of behaviours on others			No acceptance

Appendix 8 Incident log – Coach interviews

Key: **Immediate/ rapid acceptance** **Delayed acceptance** **Rejection of feedback**

Bold print indicates the primary area of feedback *Italic print* indicates other forms of feedback mentioned in the incident.

Ref.	Reason for coaching	Trigger for feedback – key message	Mode of feedback				Perceived response
			Live action Observation	In the moment	Psychometric debrief	Self-realisation	
C2-1	Communication & performance issues	Crystallisation of observed pattern seen over several interactions		**Reporting a pattern seen over time**			Immediate acceptance Previously unaware
C3-1	Unproductive workplace conflict	Gave advice when the client had no ideas on how to approach the issue		**Advice given on solving issue**	*Energy leadership index Strengthsfinder DISC*		Immediate acceptance Previously unaware
C3-2	Remedial **-** Referred by HR re workplace conflict/ complaints.	Standard three psychometrics used at the start of the coaching engagement.		**Advice on conflict handling techniques**	*Energy leadership index Strengthsfinder DISC*		Immediate acceptance Previously unaware
C6-2	Personality clash with line manager and own team	Preparation for attendance on team building event		**Reporting pattern seen over time**	*MBTI II Strengthsfinder*		Immediate acceptance Previously unaware

				Input on TA & Johari models			
C1-1	Remedial -Referral by line manager re inflexibility of comm style/ EQ	Debrief of psychometric in the second session – a 'real eye-opener'			**Personality styles**		Delayed acceptance Previously aware
C1-2	Sales skills coaching for a team	Debrief of a sales call	**Impact on others**				Delayed acceptance Previously unaware
C1-3	Sales coaching for a team– need to flex style/EQ	Debrief of psychometric	*Challenge re. approach to sales calls (rejected)*		**Personality styles,**		Delayed acceptance Previously aware
C3-4	Supporting the transition to retirement – letting go of org role.	Observations from a book on retirement			*Energy leadership index Strengthsfinder DISC*	**Readiness to let go of work identity**	Delayed acceptance Previously aware
C4-1	Work overload, suitability for promotion, relationship issues, flight risk	3rd session - Crystallisation of observed pattern seen initial sessions		**Challenge to client's interpretation of own situation**			Delayed acceptance Previously aware
C5-1	Prior feedback re impact of impatience on others. Own lack of time to think	3rd session - Crystallisation of observed pattern seen in initial	*Relaying observations of others*	**Challenge to client's interpretation**	*MBTI Step II FIRO-B*		Delayed acceptance Previously aware

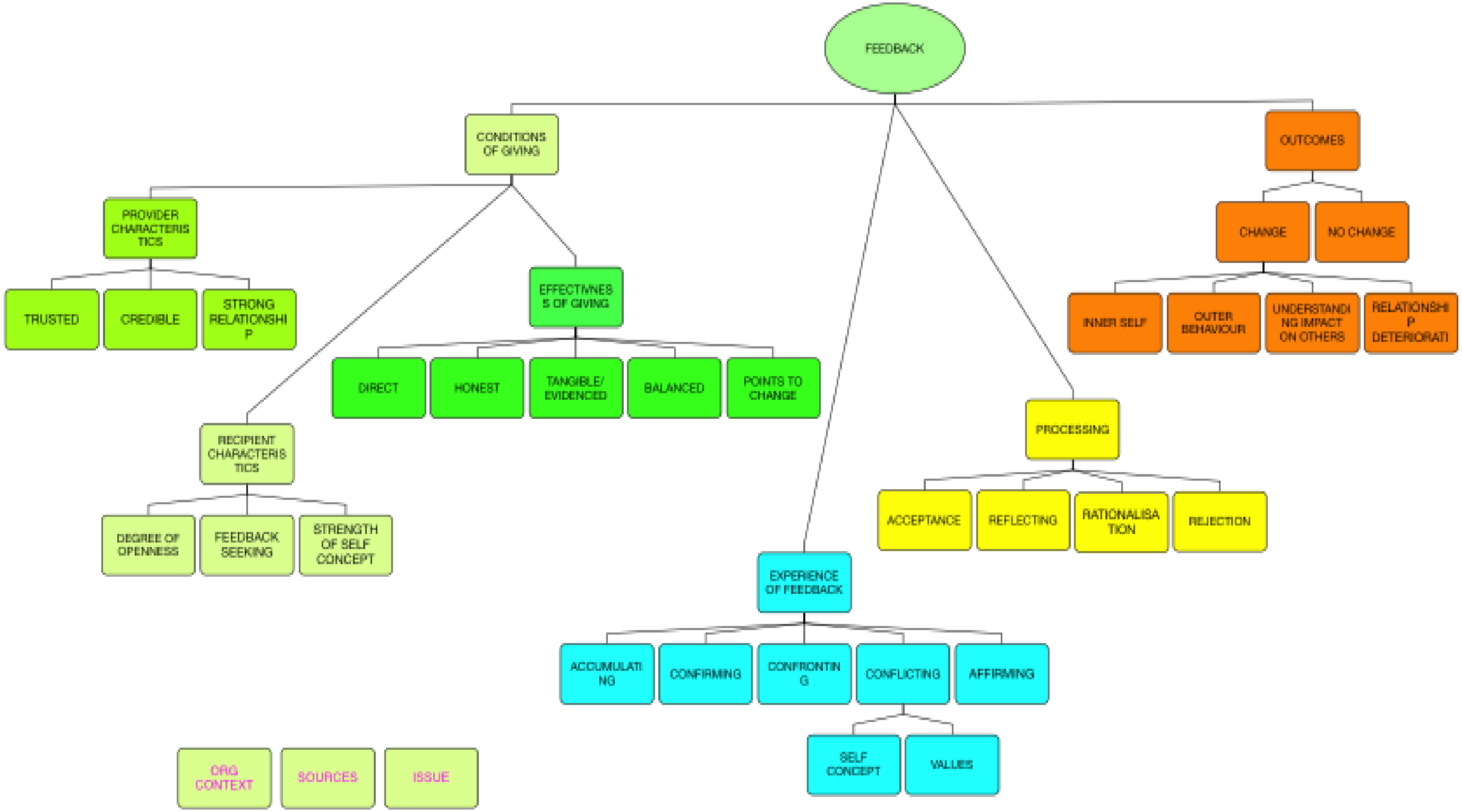
		sessions and collected from others		**of own situation Sharing personal impact**			
C6-1	Preparation for attendance on internal training programme	Debrief of 360 and psychometric		*Advice giving re confidence*	**360 feedback (accepted) FIRO-B**		Delayed acceptance Mixed awareness
C3-3	Following Leadership retreat at request of line manager	Standard three psychometrics used at start of coaching engagement. Own observations of the leader at a leadership retreat	Lack of empathy for others, ways in which he created conflict		Energy leadership index, Strengthsfinder, DISC		No acceptance
C4-2	Remedial training following poor 360 scores	Follow up after (remedial) training		[Observation of negative behaviours]	360 feedback (rejected)		No acceptance
C5-2	Prior 360 highlighting poor behaviours, lack of human connection	Debrief 360 Personal experience		Personal experience of the client (rejected)	360 feedback (rejected)		No acceptance
C6-3	Non-acceptance of feedback from a development centre and line management	360 used to validate assessment centre feedback	Assessment centre observations		360 feedback (rejected) StrengthsFinder		No acceptance

Appendix 9: Sample of coding 1 and coding hierarchy (from L1-1)

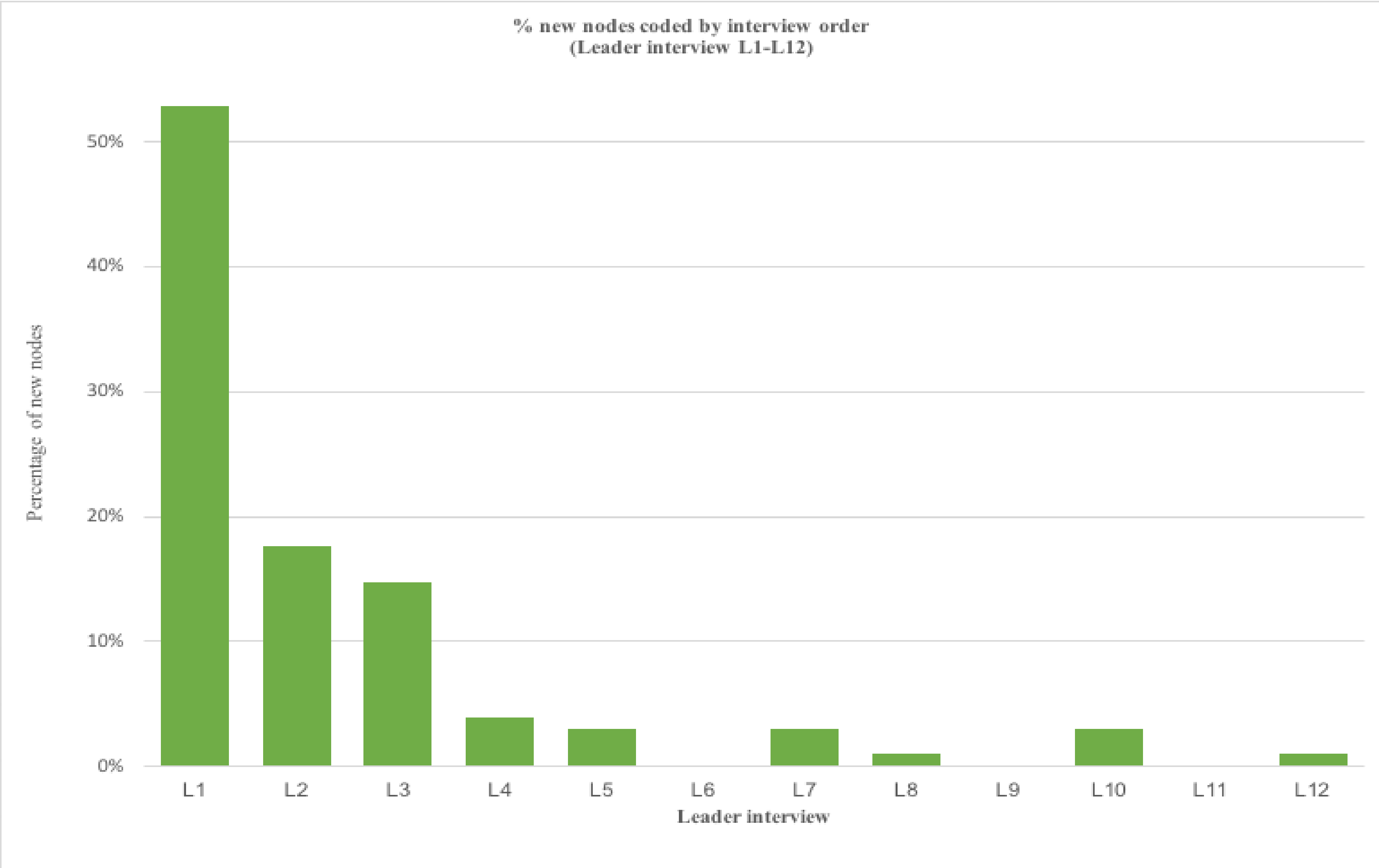
Verbatim text (coded fragments of text highlighted)	**Node Coding**	**Theme**	**Category for reporting purposes**
"I began to get a lot of feedback from people over various areas that have said, 'Look, stop questioning what you're doing or your judgment or your ability, just get on and do it because if we as the leaders of the business didn't have confidence in you, you wouldn't be in your position', and I think that's a particular example where my bosses, people that I work closely with have sort of rammed that home to me, in that sort of period.	Hearing from multiple sources Positive injunction to change Hearing from multiple sources	Feeling an accumulative effect Feeling positively confronted Feeling an accumulative effect	Participant experience
One was a chap I used to work for called XX, he is very good at driving people to do up and above what they think they can possibly do, I worked very closely with him and I would quite often go to him with a question if I was doing the right thing or making the right decision and,	From trusted line manager/ close relationship	Trusting relationship with the provider	Participant sense-making [Conditions of giving – provider characteristics]
he would invariably sit down and say, 'Look, for Christ's sake stop it ... get on and do what you're doing because I have 110% confidence in you, so just go and do it and whatever you do will be the right thing for the business and it will be the right answer'.	Positive injunction to change/ expressing confidence	Feeling positively confronted Feeling affirmed	Participant experience

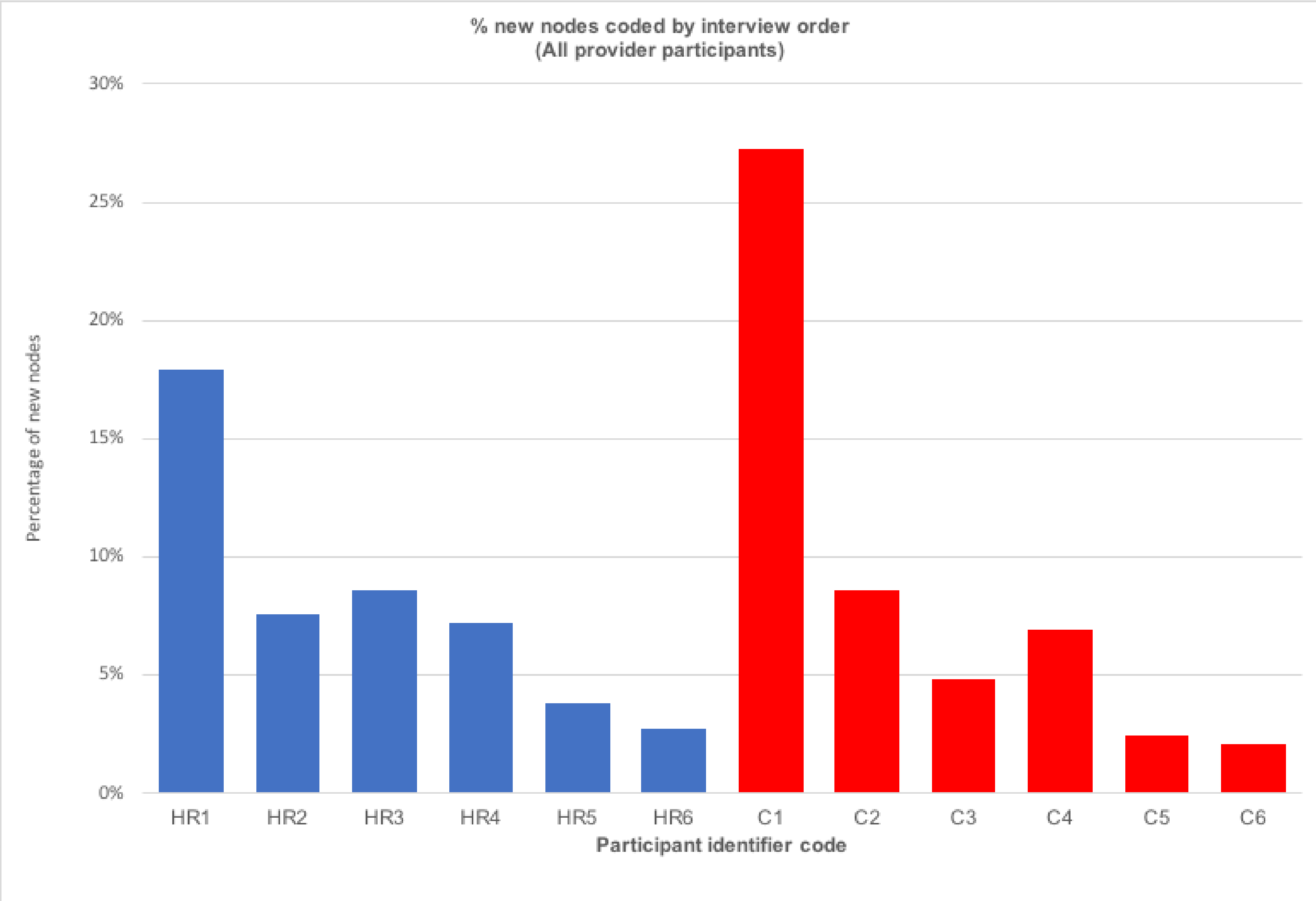
I think I probably heard that so many times that I've actually been able to listen to it, whereas previously, in the manner he does it - he could equally chastise you just as much when you know you've angered him, you know you've angered him.	Hearing message repeated over time	Feeling an accumulative effect	
So if he tells you you're doing a good job, and you're leading your people in the right way as well, it actually builds your confidence up because you know he's not bullshitting you, he's not saying it for an easy life because he will generally tell you if he felt you were doing it wrong.	From trusted line manager/ truthfulness and honesty/ directness of message	Trusting the provider	Participant sense-making [Conditions of giving – provider characteristics]
So that effectively enabled me, helped me start to have more confidence and direction, in the things that I was doing within the business and the decisions I was making."	Building self-confidence/ self-efficacy	Strengthening sense of self	Participant changes / actions

Appendix 10 Mind map of leader data (high-level categories)



Appendix 11: Coding count: % New nodes coded by interview




% new nodes coded by interview order
(All provider participants)
Percentage of new nodes
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
HR1
HR2
HR3
HR4
HR5
HR6
C1
C2
C3
C4
C5
C6
Participant identifier code

Appendix 12: Participant information

Leader Participants/ Feedback recipients

	L1	**L2**	**L3**	**L4**	**L5**	**L6**	**L7**	**L8**	**L9**	**L10**	**L11**	**L12**
Age Range	50-59	40-50	30-40	40-50	40-50	40-50	>60	30-40	40-50	40-50	40-50	50-59
Gender	Male	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Length of interview	58	39	47	50	40	30	47	45	34	49	34	61
Location	UK	USA	UK	Europe	Europe	USA	Europe	UK	Europe	USA	USA	Europe
Role	Operations	Operations	Functional	Operations	Operations	Functional	Operations	Functional	Operations	Operations	Operations	Operations
Job level	Director	VP	Head of	VP	VP	Head of	VP	Head of	VP	VP	VP	VP

HR professionals and External coaches/ Feedback providers

	HR1	HR2	HR3	HR4	HR5	HR6	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6
Age range	40-50	40-50	40-50	40-50	40-50	30-40	50-60	50-60	30-40	50-60	40-50	40-50
Gender	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male	Female
Length of interview	54	55	62	81	56	51	56	49	53	85	49	70
Location	UK	Germany	UK	UK	UK	Germany	UK	Singapore	USA	UK	Ireland	UK
Role	HR Generalist	L&D Specialist	HR Generalist	L&D Specialist	HR Generalist	L&D Specialist	External Coach	External Coach	External Coach	External Coach/ L&D Specialist	External Coach/ L&D Specialist	External Coach/ L&D Specialist
Job level	SVP	Director	Head of HR	Director	Head of HR	Director	50-60	50-60	30-40	50-60	40-50	40-50