



**STOP
UNDERMINING
DEMOCRACY AND
YOUR BUSINESS**

Carol Sanford

Almost everyone has far more potential than they achieve in their lives.

This is partly because we do not know how to properly support human growth and development. In fact, we do not know the foundational capacities that, if fully developed, would give people the extraordinary ability to grow themselves and contribute to the growth of everyone around them. Developing these capacities would also engender more courage and vision. But, for the most part, we work on the wrong things.

As a result, we create a plethora of practices to pursue misdirected improvements in human performance and behavior, thereby undermining human potential, business results, and societal functioning. I spoke to 30 of these toxic practices in *The Regenerative Business*. My new book, *No More Feedback: Cultivating Consciousness at Work*, deepens the exploration on one of those toxins—feedback—in all its forms, and how it harms people, business, and democracy.

This manifesto is about how we come to adopt such toxic practices. We tend to offer others justifications for the “best” practices we have adopted, offering profuse examples of the value we have received, how our company has found ways to compensate for the side effects and, in fact, declare it is foundational to our human resource function. You may right now be confused, even defensive, about the practice of feedback and why I am challenging it. If this is the case, you can either stop reading now, or you can become curious about why anyone would challenge something so engrained in 84 percent of organizations today, including families. Your mission, if you chose to accept it, is to explore how you think when you adopt a practice.

Blinded to Toxicity in the Workplace

Why is it that organizational leaders, and people in general, have such difficulty recognizing the negative impacts of their business practices and work designs? Why do we so deeply believe in what is later found to be not only untrue, but often harmful? What allowed me, as a young assistant professor with high aspirations, to give in to 360-degree feedback as a best practice? I believe it is the lack of a discernment and reflective process to examine what we are sold. If we knew it was going to negatively impact the business—and be partly to blame for the deterioration in our democratic processes, it might wake us up. Let me explore with you how that is happening way too often.

False Certainties Are Not My Fault— or Yours!

Do you remember the low-fat craze? I do. I did not question its premise and kept eating the low-fat way for decades, undermining my health even as I studied and debunked misguided business practices. When I finally heard the messages my body was sending and learned I had fallen for false research, I felt really stupid for a long time. I had been duped by claims concocted by industries pushing harmful products to make money. I hate being fooled.

We do not need to go into the details of that fiasco but we do need to understand how it was possible and why so many smart people were taken in, including me. At this stage of life, I consider myself to be intelligent, highly discerning, and conscious that my choices are my own. But I still get mad at myself for falling victim to the low-fat scam.

Developing this kind of examination—in this instance, by tackling feedback—is an invitation to engage in a process of discernment that is extremely difficult, even for those with the best of intentions. Reality blinders prevent us from seeing how we were sold a bill of goods, and we become defenders of it. I have come to define them as the five big challenges—or restraints—of which we are mostly unaware, especially if we are not thinking critically about ourselves and others. I still have to remind myself of these challenges, and I am someone who writes and teaches about them every day of my life!

The Challenges

First, we are all culturally dependent. That is, all of us live in a culture interwoven with what social psychologists call “implicit agreements.” To belong and be accepted by our communities, we agree to accept the dominant patterns governing our way of interpreting and making sense of events. These patterns seem right to us; we do not question them. They often include our political and religious leanings, our understanding of how relationships work, what makes for success, and how we view ourselves within our families. So many people with power and influence tell us these agreements are true, that it is hard to go against the grain and question them. And if we did, we might well be ostracized by groups of people we depend on for our well-being

Reality blinders prevent us from seeing how we were sold a bill of goods, and we become defenders of it.

(family, friends, teachers, colleagues, congregations, agencies), which would leave us feeling alone, unstable, unloved, and alienated.

Second, there is no process readily available to most of us for questioning the assumptions and agreements that have shaped us. Most communities never question or invite individuals to question what they have been taught their whole lives by their families, schools, employers, religious communities, and social circles. What everyone thinks and believes is so familiar (and the brain loves what is familiar) that it seems sacrilegious and cynical to question anything. “Better not!” our society seems to say.

Third, like bees seeking nectar, the human brain seeks and adheres to what is familiar. This statement is related to the misinterpretation that all people hate change. For the most part, we have to be taught to value and take charge of discerning and enacting beneficial change. However, we are disadvantaged by the oldest part of the human brain, the function that evolved to issue alerts when we are unsafe, likely to be attacked by a tiger or some other enemy, which is always triggered by what is unfamiliar. At the least hint that something near us has been altered, the fight or flight response kicks in, flooding our bodies with cortisol and then adrenaline, and producing a mental suspicion that the new thing will undermine our safety and success. I define this fear as the inability to know how to relate to what has changed. We refer casually to its mental consequences as a “meltdown.”

Fear of change kicks in even when people are faced with life-threatening risks that require immediate changes in behavior. Studies reveal that when patients with heart disease who have undergone traumatic bypass surgery are told that, unless they adjust their lifestyle, they will quickly die, only about 9 percent are able to change their old behaviors. We see something like this every day in organizations undergoing change. Mount Eliza Business School researched change initiatives in companies and found that more than 70 percent fail—not because they are not sound business ideas but because people resist them in order to avoid the unfamiliar.

The trick to changing our behavior is to change what we mistakenly think we are seeing and thinking, but this is difficult largely because human brains are extremely effective and tenacious in maintaining the status quo. The good news is that—balancing this rather primitive mechanism of resistance—our brain cells are continually forming new connections and restructuring our perceptions and physiology. This process of neuroplasticity happens thousands of times a day and gives us enormous potential to change, individually and collectively, if only we can find and learn to manage the sources of resistance. But we need help. Speaking of which...

Fourth, most of us do not have access to communities that can effectively support us as we learn to manage change. We can do this work only with the help of people who accept and regularly initiate change and consider this to be a natural and happy part of life. These people—who I call resources—are most often found in organizations and communities where change is considered normal and valued, and where individuals are ostracized only when they refuse to develop discernment and the willingness to change. Resources help us engage in rigorous questioning and reflection as part of developmental processes that are available to everyone.

Fifth, most of us also do not have access to the necessary social technology for addressing these challenges. In any creative field, people need social technologies, vocabularies, frameworks, and ways of engaging in community to develop their highest levels of capability. This is as true of businesspeople as it is of screenwriters, plumbers, and attorneys. All jobs worth doing require apprenticeship and often extensive formal education before practitioners qualify to become journeymen and then move up to expert positions. No one can succeed without a well-tested and validated technology and the capability to use it.

The developmental alternatives in *No More Feedback* shift perspective on our ideas about feedback and other toxic practices and serve as instruments in a larger technology of change that provides ways of dealing with each of these five limitations, rather than seeking detours around them and causing potentially even worse problems.

Creating a Developmental Conscious Workplace

In *The Regenerative Business*, I wrote at length about how to design and construct an organizational work system that provides the fundamental conditions to make the development of core human capacities possible—from a self-determined path. In *No More Feedback*, we look at specific ideas on how to replace the 30 Toxic Practices. I have a list of 100 but have only had time to develop these first 30. The alternative is to build a Developmental Organization, something my colleagues and I started 60 years ago at Procter & Gamble. It is based on the idea of building Consciousness at Work.

What can be achieved with developmental work design and management practice cannot be overstated. People are often able to liberate themselves from harmful or otherwise unproductive behavioral patterns in which, as one young employee put it, they feel “as if [their] feet were trapped in cement.” She understood the challenges but did not have the ability to work on them. What she heard in feedback from others did not resonate with her, even with all the examples she was given. Once feedback was eliminated, she was able to look more squarely at what she was up against, and this enabled her to see it in realistic proportion and find creative ways to take it on.

What can be achieved with developmental work design and management practice cannot be overstated.

Shelley worked as a customer service representative for an Oregon-based market data company. She received feedback that admonished her to become a better listener and understand all of the details of an issue before she shifted into problem-solving mode—a pretty basic skill for an online or telephone service rep. Her feedback team used customer evaluations in an effort to help her see that people sometimes felt she was missing their point and going to work on the wrong thing.

In the shift to a developmental way of working, everyone began doing their own very structured personal development plan.

Shelley was very creative when faced with complex problems. During a developmental planning event, she and others explored the idea of customer consideration that went beyond the usual call management skills themselves, as a basis for evolving the company's approach to customer service. Shelley was inspired by the difference between asking customers to identify their problems and actually moving into connecting with their lives. Up to that time, her team had engaged customers in a fairly conventional manner: ask the customer to describe the problem and make sure you understand it, including any specific information required for a solution.

As part of the company's work to build a developmental organization, Shelley created her own developmental plan. Her aim was to make a real difference for her customers by engaging in deeper considering of their lives and their aspirations beyond her product. What would most benefit each customer in pursuing these aspirations? This was a much different activity than accepting feedback from her manager and peers, and slowing down to become a better listener about the specific technical problem a customer was calling about. As part of the work on her plan, Shelley decided to experiment with a shift from question-and-answer to dialogue with the customer, seeking to discover the unique circumstances that her customer brought to their life and, by extension, the buying process. She wanted to understand it as if she was having the same experience. She wanted to put herself in the customer's life, beyond her shoes.

When I later spoke with Shelley, she enthusiastically reported that she had tried the new strategy and worked with a customer who purchased a media marketing program and was having trouble executing it. She became his “thinking partner,” working with him to figure out what kind of experience he wanted to provide for his clients, how the media program would be helpful, and how he would measure success.

In the course of their conversation, she and the customer imagined the desired outcome together, creating a shared story that allowed them to see the customer’s client experience in precise detail. This helped the customer clarify exactly what he wanted, and how the marketing program would help him do it. He was deeply grateful for the genuinely meaningful support he received and, not coincidentally, a short time later he also made an additional significant purchase.

I asked Shelley about her experience. She described it as somewhat scary because she had to work in a way that she had heard about in a development session but had no experience of herself. She felt nervous taking it on but she wanted to commit to it as a way to broaden her scope of considering. She brought in an exercise that we had been working on, which involved managing her personal worries by reflecting on herself and her fear of failing. When these fears arose, she addressed them by remembering her personally developed aim: To benefit the lives of her customers. This helped her find courage and remain in the dialogue.

Shelley summed it up for her team this way:

I genuinely understood what it takes to engage with a customer as a unique person, to see where they’re coming from in their interactions with other people. I glimpsed a real life, and the person living it mattered to me. This was very different from seeing a person’s problem and listening hard to hear the salient details, as if they would help me come up with a magic solution. It took a lot of courage and faith in my own imagination. It was exciting to find out that I could do it, and it was thrilling to hear the customer find his own solution, a true one based on his actual needs.

Shelley's success came from developing the capability to be her customer's thinking partner, not from feedback on her behavior, or being told what to do better. It sprang from her commitment to imagine the customer's real life, not from following a better script on the phone or online. She could see for herself what was needed. The results were thrilling to hear because the process she had entered with the customer resonated deeply with her own self-development.

An epilogue to Shelley's story is very moving. At the time, her 13-year-old son, Rafael, was behaving in some unexpectedly challenging ways. She realized that her aim for customers could be transferred to her interactions with her son. She wanted to understand his life and be his thinking partner. She knew this was critical to his happiness and success later in life, and to her own as his mother. She stopped herself many times over the next several weeks from offering solutions for his problems based on the ways she was experiencing them. She could also see how her usual way of mothering him was escalating his stress—and her own. He later described the way he had been feeling as, "It was like she was trying to run my life."

Shelley finally pulled out a systemic framework that she used in the program at work, one that invites people to engage from alternative perspectives with the forces at odds in a situation rather than trying to argue them away. She invited Rafael to engage with her in this structured way of thinking, which is part of the developmental process an organization can use to build systemic critical thinking skills.

Shelley's success came from developing the capability to be her customer's thinking partner.

When frameworks like this one are used on a recurring basis, they help people develop the ability to view situations and experiences from more whole and dynamic perspectives. Coupled with personal self-managing, they enable seeing without judging and help all parties in a difficult situation discover the whole of the potential hidden by our normal way of engaging.

What Makes Developmental Processes Work?

For any group, regardless of size, all individual members must be self-accountable and self-governing to be viable, vital, and evolving appropriately within the ever-changing world in which they live and work. The developmental process is not a canned program to be installed in any generic organization. It is not about flattening hierarchies either. Rather, it is a way of seeing clearly and working with conscious mental energy, in real time, that must be developed. If it is to be effective in the long run, within the contexts of each of their lives, individuals must have stewardship for the welfare of the people who they serve, beyond the problem they present. To learn to self-manage their behaviors, individuals must discover through self-reflection and noticing the impacts of their effort to benefit the lives of others.

This is the fork in the road. Here, those who advocate external feedback as the solution to life's problems take one path, based on the belief that people cannot develop the awareness needed for change. Those who have seen the unlimited potential of a developmental approach based on a holistic, living-systems view take another. This road is of a higher order, in that it is based on a belief that people have the capacity to be self-managing once they have learned to be self-observing and self-reflecting. But they need development to do so.

To be capable of self-reflection is to be able, of one's own volition, to see oneself in the moment of action, and to regulate and adjust one's behavior while in motion. Everyone has experienced self-reflection on at least a few occasions. The aim is to make it more routine and accessible in all situations. In the developmental version of the human story, one nurtures the capability to be consistently self-reflective through the creation of developmental plans that provide for the required inner work and outer contribution. The plan includes establishing alliances with others who not only have deep familiarity with the self-work involved but also possess the skill and time to serve as resources. This is a process that involves learning to learn and learning to develop. It is worlds apart from a feedback program; offering feedback as part of a learning relationship is entirely inappropriate and can derail development. *No More Feedback* gives more details on building Development Organizations, and on the history of feedback being brought from machine systems into human systems, explaining why it is so damaging and how it directly undermines a democracy working, not to mention the bottom and top line of the business you lead.

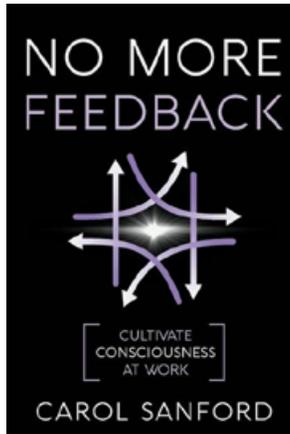
The Effective, But Still Not Easy Path

It is a hard road, to go against prevailing paradigms and the assurances we are given that everything will work out in the end. But trust me. Developing discernment and the core capacities is difficult, destabilizing, and almost impossible to accomplish alone. The most effective path has proven to be working regularly and intensely with others in similar positions, those who are also questioning, reconceptualizing, and then designing out feedback and other toxic practices. The way forward is not simply to adopt a new practice.

First, we must shift mental paradigms. 📌



Info



Ready to dig deeper into this idea? Buy a copy of [No More Feedback](#).

Want copies for your organization or for an event?

We can help: customerservice@800ceoread.com 800-236-7323



Powered by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ, ChangeThis is a

vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest developments in business books and ideas at 800ceoread.com

This document was created on January 23, 2019 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover image from Adobe Stock.

About the author

Carol Sanford's work is deeply rooted in the belief that people can grow and develop beyond what their leaders or anyone sees possible: to be increasingly entrepreneurial, innovative, and responsible in their business and personal actions. She approaches her work as an ecosystem with stakeholders to the business in order to create the organizational conditions and human capability for people to innovate and contribute. Through a Socratic and contrarian approach, backed by research and stories, Carol challenges leaders to rethink everything they currently know about leadership, management, and work design. In the end, she guides people to find their individual and collective "promise beyond able-ness," embedding enormous possibilities into an organization. Sanford is the author of three previous books: *The Responsible Business*, *The Responsible Entrepreneur*, and *The Regenerative Business*.

Share this

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.



Subscribe

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.

