Deploying Feedback for Personal Learning in the Workplace: Leveraging Culture, Ritualization, and Technology

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Deploying Feedback for Personal Learning in the Workplace: Leveraging Culture, Ritualization, and Technology

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education
Dedication

For Bapuji and Anabita
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Abstract

Feedback interactions at the workplace are a staple of organizational life and have long been considered vital for advancing task performance, behavior adaptation, and fostering learning-oriented behaviors. Yet, giving and receiving feedback—especially when it is critical—within the dynamics of organizational life, and in a manner that advances learning tends to be intractably challenging. In particular, the complexity of the underlying mechanisms and processes by which organizational members navigate feedback interactions and learn from them remain a black box. Moreover, organizational literature highlights the role of feedback for catalyzing transformative learning where individuals can use the feedback to examine and potentially alter the assumptions and beliefs that lie at the root of their behaviors. However, the use of feedback for the improvement of the person in the workplace is unconventional, and it stands in contrast to the more common applications of feedback for enhancing performance, process, and product.

In this dissertation, I utilize organizational ethnography to examine the feedback culture at Next Jump, an organization with a novel approach to feedback. In this company, feedback is designed and implemented via various programs with the explicit goal of supporting the personal learning of the employees. Over a nine-month period, I conducted participant observations, interviews, and archival analysis to investigate how employees gave and received feedback; the beliefs and narratives from senior leadership members which shaped the design of the feedback architecture; and how employees interpreted and navigated their roles as givers and receivers of personal feedback.

The study revealed a feedback-rich culture in which feedback interactions were formalized and ritualized through various programs that took place at regular, frequent intervals. I first present the senior leaders’ beliefs and attitudes about the goal and nature
of feedback. Next, I report on the nature of the feedback comments and highlight five interaction “moves” used by feedback givers when offering feedback. I found that distinct patterns of moves were used by members depending on whether they delivered the feedback in-person or anonymously, and also depending on the specific context in which feedback was offered. Finally, as I explore the personal experiences of employees in their roles as givers and receivers of feedback, I discover the threads of challenge, change, and confirmation in these myriad experiences. This study contributes to a growing base of qualitative examinations of feedback interactions in the workplace which go beyond “snapshots” of single feedback interactions. It offers an opportunity to capture a contextualized understanding of a feedback-rich culture, its on-the-ground workings, and the process, opportunities, and challenges of catalyzing feedback into learning.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Feedback is a staple of organizational life and has long been considered vital for individual and organizational learning. For the individual, it can advance task performance, assist in redirecting efforts in the pursuit of important goals, and facilitate behavior adaptation (Dweck & Legett, 1988; Ilgen & Davis, 2000). At the organizational level, feedback is essential for detecting and correcting errors, improving performance, and fostering learning-oriented behaviors (Argyris & Schon, 1978). However, feedback conversations tend to be intractably difficult to have within organizations (Stone & Heen, 2014). The giving of honest, challenging feedback frequently flies against conventional, but typically unstated, organizational norms of “saving face” and maintaining cordial relationships. Critical feedback can often be delivered in a vague manner that obfuscates the real message or can be voiced from a unilaterally controlling approach that risks provoking anxieties in the receiver (Schwarz, 2013). Receiving feedback with minimal defensiveness is no easier. For example, it is hard not to give in to our evolutionary priming to recognize and defend against the anxieties triggered by disconfirming critical feedback that can pose as a threat to our desired self-image. Such defensive coping actions may provide comfort to the receiver but can also limit learning. As a result, enabling learning-oriented feedback interactions amongst employees remains an uphill task for many organizations.

In addition, current research into feedback in the workplace has, to a large extent, emphasized the use of feedback for the goals of performance improvement and management. Organizational literature, however, also points to the role of feedback for catalyzing transformative learning where individuals use the feedback to examine and potentially alter their underlying assumptions (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Feedback can offer people an insight into how their behavior produces the very results that they do not like or
want. However, such a potential use of feedback in the organizational context has not been studied. Detailed, empirical accounts of feedback practices within the real-world dynamics of organizational life are also largely missing from literature (Anseel, Beatty, Shen, Lievens, & Sackett, 2013). Such knowledge could expand our understanding of how organizations might mobilize feedback in service of learning for their members.

In this dissertation, I examined the feedback culture at Next Jump, an organization with a highly novel approach to organizing feedback and utilizing it for the goal of supporting the personal learning of its members. Next Jump brought a two-decade experience with establishing feedback programs, and related “rituals,” a term employed by the organization, to spur the “development” of its people. Within this unique context, I sought to understand the various practices through which Next Jump members offered and received feedback geared towards their personal learning, with a particular emphasis on describing the manner in which these practices were enacted on the ground. In addition, I also examined how Next Jump members made meaning of their experiences within the roles of givers and receivers of feedback, and how they navigated, interpreted, and responded to feedback. Next, I provide a review of the literatures that I draw upon to frame this study.

**Review of Literatures**

Feedback is a recurring feature of organizational life and is crucial to both individual and organizational learning. At the basic level, feedback in the workplace is information available in an individual’s environment about his or her behaviors. Feedback plays a crucial role in reducing uncertainties for the individual. It tells the person about the appropriateness of their actions for meeting specific goals (“referent information”) and how well they are
enacting the behaviors in service of those goals (“appraisal information”) (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford, 1986; Fishbach, Eyal, & Finkelstein, 2010; Ilgen & Davis, 2000).

Research posits that feedback is an individual as well as organizational “resource” (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Feedback at the individual level can help advance task performance (De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & Buyens, 2011; DeNisi & Kluger, 2000; Ilgen & Davis, 2000) and spur individuals’ creative performance (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017; Yuan & Zhou, 2008). Moreover, feedback also plays a role in the generation of individual “self-concept” (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, p. 372). This literature suggests that feedback gives people information about how others are perceiving them and that these perceptions then shape how individuals fundamentally think about themselves (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Mead, 1934).

In addition, feedback also serves an essential organizational function for the leaders who can use the feedback to “motivate, direct, and instruct the performance of subordinate members” (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, p. 371). Organizational leaders can use the feedback to “direct the energies of the subordinates to those goals and behaviors most valued by the organization” (p. 375). In addition, feedback is also a salient strategy for newcomer socialization as it can provide new members with important cues and information about their new environment, especially the correctness of their behaviors and how these need to be modified (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Wangberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000).

Another use of feedback at the organizational level is the crucial role it plays within the organization in detecting and correcting errors at the organization level, which can translate into single or double loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Schein, 2011). In single-loop learning, the mismatch between an individual’s intentions and outcomes is
acknowledged, investigated and corrected by changing behaviors; but the underlying assumptions or beliefs that fuel the actions are left untouched. In contrast, double-loop learning hinges on individuals developing an awareness of the assumptions guiding their actions, and then publicly testing them to gather information from the environment that confirms or disconfirms these assumptions (Argyris, 1990). Both forms of learning require that individuals be able to take in disconfirming evidence, in the form of critical feedback, and reflect on the effectiveness of their actions.

As per conventional wisdom, feedback is constructive, when it is specific and timely (e.g., concrete and detailed message given soon after the behavior in focus), and has a task focus rather than a person focus (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Ilgen & Moore, 1987; Smither & Walker, 2004). Historically, feedback research suggests that highly specific feedback is more helpful because it is likely to be more believable, and it gives the receiver concrete information from which he or she can change actions. However, a recent study exploring the role of feedback in creative projects found that highly specific feedback was not necessarily most useful when the feedback was being given in the context of complex work or situations where the purpose was to generate “additional exploration” (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017, p. 2066) rather than offer a right answer. The authors of this study argue that feedback for creative work that is inherently complex, is instead most effective when “it finds a middle path between being too directive or too diffused” (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017, p. 2052) and offers feedback-givers the “interpretational flexibility to see new connections” (Haragadon & Bechky, 2006, p. 493). These findings echo some other studies which suggest that specific feedback, when given for tasks that are simple and codifiable, helps to improve performance during the practice phase, but it can also lower
the exploration and thus undermine learning needed for later, more independent performance (Goodman, Wood, & Hendrickx, 2004; Segal, 2004).

Besides specificity, feedback literature is also inconclusive regarding the impact of the sign of feedback (positive or negative) on performance improvement. Negative feedback is an important element of behavior change and goal attainment because, as described earlier, it contains data about where and how individuals need to adjust their behaviors and actions (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Festinger, 1954; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990). However, positive feedback which affirms behavior has a higher likelihood to be accepted and acted upon, as compared to disconfirming negative feedback. This highlights the challenges inherent in receiving and giving critical feedback, especially within the real-world dynamics of the workplace.

Next, I lay out what the literature says about some of the common ways feedback giving and receiving tend to happen in the workplace, including challenges that individuals face when giving and receiving feedback. I then describe what the literature says about the impact that the characteristics of the context in which the feedback interaction occurs have on how feedback is given and received. I end this review of feedback literature by presenting new demands on organizations, and the opportunities organizations have to change the way feedback is deployed.

**Challenging Nature of Feedback Interactions**

**Giving critical feedback.** At the outset, the environment in the workplace can inhibit (or foster) employees from sharing critical feedback. Research from the employee voice literature suggests that several institutional factors can hinder employees from expressing their “voice” – that is, speak up with questions, concerns,
challenges, and critical feedback (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). This strand of research suggests that in a workplace environment where “managers fear negative feedback” (Morrison & Milliken, 2000, p. 3) from subordinates, they hesitate to “speak up” with their concerns and challenges. Such a workplace is marked by a lack of formal upward feedback mechanisms, members tend to be excluded from decision making to avoid dissent or feedback, and there is marked hostility towards those offering negative feedback (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Research suggests that in an environment that is characterized by this form of “organizational silence” an organization’s ability to detect and correct errors, and therefore learn, is compromised. Without critical feedback, errors tend to persist and may even intensify because corrective actions are not taken when needed (Argyris & Schon, 1978). This research highlights that an organizational environment in which organizational members in a variety of roles can receive critical feedback with less defensiveness fosters other learning-oriented behaviors such as speaking up with disagreements or asking challenging questions.

Moreover, giving critical feedback to someone in authority (that is to a senior leader or manager) is also impacted by the “taken for granted beliefs about when and why speaking up at work is risky or inappropriate” (Deteret & Edmondson, 2011, p. 461). Research by Deteret & Edmondson (2011) suggests that individuals engage in an organizational interaction involving someone in authority – for example when giving critical feedback – with “self-protective implicit voice theories,” which are unspoken assumptions about the risks of speaking up and challenging those in authority positions. This strand of research suggests that one reason employees do not speak up with a challenging perspective, such as when offering critical feedback to their superior, is because they are operating from one or more of the following four implicit assumptions about what it means to speak up to an
authority figure. First, a challenging voice or perspective would be taken as a personal criticism by the individual receiving it. Second, the perspective being offered needs to be polished and backed by some evidence before it is safe to speak up. Third, any kind of challenge or questioning that publicly exposes or embarrasses the authority will make the interaction unsafe. Fourth, any form of challenge is likely to lead to negative career consequences. The authors contend that these assumptions, which typically remain untested, can hinder employees from sharing challenging perspectives with their supervisors and managers.

Giving upwards feedback is not the only challenge facing organizational members. Managers and organizational leaders also struggle with offering critical feedback to their subordinates or team members. Research suggests that supervisors tend to “inflate” (Ilgen & Knowlton, 1980, p. 442; Fisher, 1979) their feedback ratings to subordinates, especially to those whom they perceive to be low performers. This is done with the intent to “decrease the unpleasantness associated with giving feedback that they feel their subordinates do not want to hear” (Ilgen & Knowlton, 1980, p. 442). Moreover, the tendency to “inflate” ratings was more pronounced once supervisors realized that they had to provide critical feedback and evaluation in face-to-face interaction with their team members. As Ilgen & Knowlton (1980) concluded, “the confounding of feedback with the need for personal interaction reflects the situation most typically encountered in organizations when feedback is given” (p. 453).

Research by Kegan & Lahey (2001) offers a different lens on how employees, especially managers, give feedback in a way that leads to an ineffective and unproductive interaction. They suggest that many individuals giving feedback in the workplace do so with implicit assumptions that they are “right” about their assessment,
that they are the only ones to have a “correct view of the situation” (p. 128), and that the feedback-receiver’s perspective on the situation is likely to be wrong. The authors contend that feedback-givers also tend to assume that they have to do most of the “saying, suggesting, and giving” during the conversation and that the feedback-receiver should “listen, accept, and receive” (p. 129). The authors argue that when employees give feedback with such an overwhelming degree of certainty that they are correct, they compromise the potential for learning in that interaction. They send signals to those receiving feedback to follow the diktat in the feedback rather than use their judgment on the matter.

**Receiving critical feedback.** The promise of critical feedback for achieving the various outcomes such as performance improvement, learning, and gains in individual creativity is tempered in practice by the potential threat that feedback poses to the desired self-image of the feedback-receivers. Research suggests that people, in general, prefer self-confirmatory feedback, and will tend to resist or reject feedback that is perceived to be inconsistent with their expectations of themselves (Carver, Antoni, & Scheier, 1985; Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Swann & Read, 1981). That is, negative feedback is often experienced as “psychologically threatening” (Northcraft & Ashford, 1990, p. 44), and thereby results in the receiver’s “fight or flight” reactions, such as resisting the feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983), dismissing it or attacking the credibility of the source (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979) and/or perceiving it to be of lower accuracy and more controlling (Fedor & Buckley, 1987). A recent study argues that employees reshape their social networks in order to gain distance from those giving critical feedback because they perceive these individuals as threats to their positive self-concept (Green, Gino, & Staats, 2017).
This insight that individuals are oriented towards protecting their self-concept is also reflected in the finding that feedback-receivers tend to perceive negative feedback to be more positive than it is reported to them (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979). Such “confirmation bias” can lead those receiving critical feedback to, incorrectly, conjure up a more favorable impression of their performance than might be the case from the perspective of the feedback-giver (Brett & Atwater, 2001). While such coping reactions might feel comforting, they often limit the learning opportunities available to the feedback-receiver (Ilgen & Davis, 2000).

Research suggests that reactions to critical feedback are also impacted by how the feedback is initiated – that is, whether the receiver intentionally solicits it or not. In contrast to “unsolicited feedback which may be readily discounted” (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003, p. 779), when individuals proactively solicit critical feedback, they are less inclined to disregard it, and are more likely to hear the feedback with less defensiveness and use it for improving performance (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003). However, soliciting negative feedback carries an inherent tension between the instrumental value that individuals can gain by seeking feedback and the ego-defense motives that can be triggered by hearing potentially disconfirming feedback. In addition, explicitly asking someone for their perception of one’s behavior – seeking through “inquiry” – can be a significant undertaking and require “effort costs” from the feedback-receiver (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). This refers to the fact that in most workplaces, the individual will have to “track down the person, get their attention, find time to explain the behavior/task/situation and context” (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, p. 388). The authors also suggest that soliciting feedback can also come with “face loss costs” (p. 390) for the feedback-receivers, because it “exposes the seeker’s uncertainty and need for help or information” (Northcraft & Ashford,
which may be in direct odds with “the need to maintain a self-assured, confident, self-presentation” (p. 45; Goffman, 1956; Mitchell, Green, & Wood, 1981).

Feedback and related organizational research points to the many ways in which giving and receiving critical feedback in the workplace is a challenging experience for many employees. In the next section, I synthesize insights from research into the vital contextual factors which can depress or increase these concerns and anxieties that come in the way of productive feedback interactions.

**Impact of Contextual Factors on the Quality of Feedback Interactions**

Research suggests that the context in which the feedback interactions take place has a significant impact on how the feedback-receivers perceive the feedback, accept it, and act on it (or not). Two aspects of the context are particularly salient: the quality of the giver-receiver relationship, and the organizational culture or the surrounding environment in which the interactions are embedded. These factors can either heighten or lower the anxiety that employees might feel from giving, soliciting, and receiving critical feedback in ways that are learning-oriented.

**Giver-receiver relationship.** The quality of the relationship between the feedback-giver and feedback-receiver has a significant impact on how the receiver perceives and accepts the comments, especially when the feedback is critical in nature. Research suggests that the feedback-receiver’s perceptions of the feedback-giver’s credibility have a significant impact on how constructively he or she receives the feedback (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Steelman, Levy & Snell, 2004). Credibility, in turn, depends on how the person receiving the feedback perceives the feedback-giver’s expertise – skills needed to form an assessment of the receiver’s behaviors – and how
much trust does the receiver have in the feedback-giver’s motives for providing that feedback. When receivers perceived the source of the feedback to have high credibility, they were more likely to accept the feedback, which refers to the “recipient’s belief that the feedback is an accurate portrayal of his or her performance” (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979, p. 356). Research from the feedback seeking strand supports these insights. It suggests that when employees had a trusting relationship with their supervisors, the perceived social and ego costs associated with seeking feedback decreased, and employees were more likely to directly ask their supervisors for negative feedback (Anseel et al., 2013; Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016; Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007). However, a perception of good intentions from the feedback-givers may not be enough for the feedback to be received well. Research suggests that the feedback-receiver’s perception of “fairness” of the comment is also important in whether employees feel motivated to change their behaviors based on the comments (or not) (DeNisi & Smith, 2014; Greenberg, 2011; Taylor et al., 1995).

**Organizational culture.** In addition to the quality of the relationship between the giver and receiver of feedback, the organization’s culture can also either exacerbate or buffer the anxieties that employees feel when engaging in feedback interactions.¹ Research from organization learning theorists Argyris & Schon (1978) suggests that when organizations operate under assumptions of interpersonal diplomacy and unilateral control, giving and receiving critical feedback can feel more vulnerable and interpersonally threatening. The authors propose that in such workplace environments, individuals receiving and giving feedback are likely to

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¹ There are adjacent literatures (e.g., help giving and receiving) that examine context in depth but not specifically as it relates to feedback giving and receiving, as is the focus of this study.
engage in actions that are geared towards face-saving by suppressing difficult feelings and withholding valuable information. In contrast, when organizational values are driven by a spirit of testing assumptions, members act to critically interrogate how their actions might be contributing to errors; in general, intergroup relations and interactions will tend to become more open to learning and reciprocity. In such a culture, members can focus on productive discussions rather than impression management or self-protection (Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998). This strand of research points to the idea that organizational efforts that support or detract from learning, more broadly, are likely to have an impact on the quality of the feedback interactions as well.

Feedback research also suggests that employees’ perceptions of how much the organization fosters learning has an impact on the frequency with which employees proactively seek feedback (Bose & Gijselaers, 2013; van der Rijet et al., 2012a). Supportive inter-personal relationships or a supervisor’s “considerate leadership style” (Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003, p. 783) can enhance or depress the image costs, by determining the meanings that are attached to the act of seeking feedback. That is, does asking for feedback signal insecurity, self-doubt, and incompetence, or does it convey self-assurance, desire for learning, and strength (Ashford & Cummings, 1983)? Thus, in general, research highlights the importance of organizations creating “supportive psychological and relational environments” (Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016, p. 235) to lower the impression management costs members experience or anticipate from seeking and receiving critical feedback.

Despite the undeniable importance of the environment within which feedback interactions occur, organizational context is an understudied element of feedback
literature. In fact, some researchers point out that context has been treated “solely as
nuisance factors to be ignored or explained away” (Steelman, Levy & Snell, 2004, p. 2). This is not entirely surprising since prior feedback research, with very few
exceptions, is based on large-scale employee surveys, self-reports, and laboratory
manipulations which draw out the factors (individual or contextual) that influence
how employees receive and feel about feedback (e.g., Anseel & Lievens, 2007;
against this backdrop, the complexity of the underlying mechanisms and processes
by which organizational members navigate feedback interactions and learn from
them amid the constraints of organizational life remain a black box (Anseel et al.,
2013; Harrison & Dossinger, 2017). This has also led to gaps in the understanding of
the content of the feedback. For example, researchers have critiqued the “little
attention [that] has been paid to the content of feedback” (Ilgen & Moore, 1987, p.
401; Ashford & Tsui, 2017). In fact, most research has focused on “single-criterion
tasks” in which “the primary performance criteria was quantity” (Ilgen & Moore,
1987, p. 401). The lack of empirical research on content and language of feedback is
not surprising when we consider that the most dominant mechanism for members to
give and get feedback is during performance evaluations, and these with rare
exceptions, tend to be private and confidential. As a result, the field has increasingly
called for studies that are oriented towards “qualitative examinations of feedback
interactions,” especially of the “behaviors of feedback seekers and givers as they
interacted in actual feedback meetings” (Ashford, De Stobbeleir & Nujella, 2016, p.
234); such research can go beyond “snapshots” of a single interaction and instead
address the process of feedback interactions (Anseel et al., 2013).
New Demands for Reconceiving the Role and Nature of Feedback

Organizations today are innovating new ways to organize and use feedback, such as through efforts to decouple feedback from its traditional performance appraisal goals and deploy it instead for people development. These experiments are spurred, in part, as evidence mounts on the ineffectiveness of relying exclusively on annual performance reviews as the context for development-oriented feedback conversations (Rock et al., 2016). Also, as the proportion of millennials participating in the US labor force expands (Fry, 2015) organizations are under increasing pressure to organize work practices to attract, engage, and retain talent (Impraise, 2017). Reports suggest that millennials expect their managers to offer more individualized coaching and feedback (Rigoni & Adkins, 2016; Tzuo, 2017). Several organizations are experimenting with weekly “manager check-ins,” (Burkus, 2016; Impraise, 2017; Turco, 2016) to offer employees ongoing, targeted feedback that is also “nimbler, frequent, and more individualized” (Buckingham & Goodall, 2015).

A further kind of organizational context in which feedback is intentionally targeted towards every member’s personal growth is the Deliberately Developmental Organization (DDO) (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). Feedback in these organizations is not only pervasive and integral to the organization’s developmental culture, but it is also explicitly directed towards developing psychological complexity for all its members. Feedback here is not offered solely with the goal to correct and fix the behavior. Instead, the purpose is to surface and illuminate individuals’ more deep-seated assumptions and mindsets underlying their behavior.

Given these new opportunities to reconsider the nature of workplace feedback (Impraise, 2017; Rock, et al., 2016), new questions emerge about how these practices
are enacted in members’ lived experiences, and how members navigate more frequent feedback and deploy it for learning goals. For example, how far does an intentionally pro-feedback organizational culture go in overcoming the well-documented psychological resistance to taking in challenging feedback?

Methodologically as well, there are new opportunities to not only generate contextualized and empirical portrayals of feedback interactions, but also to theorize how feedback might foster learning in organizations. This dissertation is an attempt to document such an effort at one organization, Next Jump, that is rapidly reimagining how feedback might be organized to advance the development of its employees.

The dissertation is organized as follows. In Chapter 2 (“Methodology”), I present the ethnographic approach I followed in conducting the study, offer a brief summary of the research site and the process that I engaged in for collecting and analyzing my data. The next three chapters encompass the major findings included in this dissertation. In Chapter 3 (“Design of Feedback: Core Principles and Programs”), I explore crucial elements of how feedback was organized within Next Jump. I begin with the expectations for the goals, intents, and nature of feedback as espoused by the senior members. I then describe the two main feedback programs through which Next Jump members regularly and consistently offered and received feedback, as well as the way in which the company leveraged technology to hone members’ feedback giving and receiving skills.

In Chapter 4 (“Moves and Responses: Unpacking Feedback-Giver and Receiver Actions”), I turn my attention to the comments that feedback-givers provided; my analysis suggests that feedback-givers relied on a set of five interaction “moves” (forms of talk) to offer their feedback. Moreover, I found that distinct patterns of moves were used by
members depending on whether they delivered the feedback in-person or anonymously, and also depending on the specific context in which feedback was offered. In Chapter 5 (“Challenge, Change, Confirmation: Individual Experience of Feedback Culture”), I investigate the personal experiences of members receiving and offering feedback. My findings suggest that members’ experiences could be characterized as an overlap between challenge, change, and confirmation. In my final chapter of this dissertation (Chapter 6, “Discussion and Conclusion”), I summarize my key findings and offer some implications for researchers and practitioners.
Chapter 2: Methodology

In this study, I employed organizational ethnography to explore how feedback can be deployed across one organization for the goals of fostering personal development. An ethnographic approach allowed me to position organizational members in the particular contexts where the feedback action – of giving, receiving, processing – was taking place, and therefore, to learn ‘how things work’ from this grounded perspective (Watson, 2011). Further, as I stated in Chapter 1, a second key motivation for this study was to shed light on the process of feedback interactions as they take place within the real-life dynamics of organizational life. The inductive qualitative approach taken in this study is well suited for studying such process or ‘how’ questions (Creswell, 1998) and is thus aligned well with the goals of this study. This chapter offers a detailed depiction of the methodology and describes the research site, the data collection process, and the analytical strategy.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What are the different mechanisms through which Next Jump members receive feedback and how are these feedback practices enacted in situ?
2. What characterizes Next Jump members’ experiences of giving and receiving personal feedback?
   a. How do members navigate the feedback they receive?
   b. How do members interpret the feedback, respond to it, and what do they do with the feedback?
   c. How does Next Jump’s feedback culture influence its members’ capacities to provide feedback, navigate feedback, and learn from it?
The Site

I utilized a purposive selection strategy (Palys, 2008; Patton, 2002) to choose a site where the phenomenon of feedback and dynamics of interest – the interactions between feedback-givers and receivers – were especially transparent. My overriding sampling goal was to find a context that met three primary criteria. One, the feedback was given and taken in the organization with the intent to help employees learn and develop in their personal attributes, that is for outcomes other than only performance development, career growth, or compensation decisions. Two, the feedback interactions took place frequently and regularly; for example, more than twice a year or annually during performance evaluation conversations. Three, the site must be a place with the openness and generosity to allow me to gather qualitative ethnographic data, including the opportunity to observe feedback meetings and conversations in action in a transparent manner.

This study took place at Next Jump, an e-commerce company that was founded in 1994 by Charlie Kim. The company started as a coupon-business which evolved into its flagship product, an e-commerce platform called “PerksAtWork.” Through this platform, the company offers employee discounts and rewards to employees in businesses around the globe. Next Jump was an ideal setting for this deep-dive qualitative study of feedback because, in parallel to its successful e-commerce business, the company had been investing and innovating in its workplace culture since more than a decade. This emphasis on the culture is reflected in the company’s vision: “Changing the world by changing workplace culture.” In fact, as will become clearer across the dissertation, the feedback was an integral element of the cultural innovations at Next Jump. That is, feedback was not a standalone or

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2 At Next Jump’s request, I have not disclosed any demographic descriptors of the organization such as data on gender, tenure, and rank in the company.
3 As mentioned on the company’s website: www.nextjump.com.
add-on program offering at Next Jump, but an important element of helping employees learn new personal capacities. This idea is captured in the company’s motto: “Better Me + Better You = Better Us.” In this equation, “better me” stands for individuals continually working on improving themselves. Importantly, this notion of self-improvement does not simply mean gaining more or better technical skills, for example, by becoming a better engineer or sales manager. Instead, it gets to the idea of becoming a better person by overcoming limitations in any areas that are personally meaningful, such as more confidently speaking up, engaging in difficult conversations, or becoming a better listener. “Better you” refers to the idea of helping others grow and succeed including co-workers. This work on the self and support of others is then believed to lead to “better us” which refers to the growing of the organization, the community, and the world.

The company has a two-decade history in organizing feedback in novel ways with the goals of deploying it – beyond the mainstream ways of performance evaluation – to help people develop new and improved mindsets and behaviors. For example, towards this end, Next Jump maintains a sharp distinction between feedback that is given with the goal of performance evaluation, feedback in the context of “recognition” of co-workers (positive in nature), and finally, feedback with a “developmental” orientation that is geared explicitly towards helping employees learn and grow in their personal characteristics. In this study, I only focused on the third dimension of “developmental” feedback practices.

Next Jump was also an optimal research site for this study due to its history and comfort with opening up its culture to outsiders. In line with its vision, “Change the world by changing workplace culture,” for the last decade Next Jump has been sharing and teaching about its culture to companies, researchers, and individuals through various programs. The company’s desire and interest in sharing its lessons on culture with the wider
world is reflected in the generous opportunities I was given to study feedback at close quarters.

Next Jump’s innovations in how it operates its workplace – in other words, the culture of the organization – was recognized in 2016 in the book, *An everyone culture: Becoming a Deliberately Developmental Organization* (Kegan & Lahey, 2016). In this book, Next Jump was one of three companies featured as “deliberately developmental organizations” (DDOs). As the authors explained, in DDOs “support of people’s development is woven into the daily fabric of working life and the company’s regular operations, daily routines, and conversations” (p. 1). In these contexts, development, as the authors clarify, does not refer to growth in a person’s career alone or even that of the business. Instead, it signals an increasing mental complexity in individuals, a qualitative shift in how a person knows rather than what he or she knows (Kegan, 1982; Kegan & Lahey, 2016). In describing the developmental features of the culture in the organizations studied, the authors highlighted feedback as one of the most consistent and “pervasive practices which served its members developmentally” (Kegan & Lahey, 2016, p. 154).

In summary, Next Jump is an “extreme case” (Flyvbjerg, 2006) which is best suited for studies such as this one, where the goal is to illuminate deeper underlying processes in a phenomenon. Next, I describe the research approach of this study, starting with the choice of organizational ethnography as the method of study, data collection processes, and the analytic strategy.

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4 The 2016 book by Kegan, Lahey, and collaborators was focused on the developmental aspects of the overall organizational culture at three companies. While feedback was clearly highlighted as one of the key aspects of the culture, descriptions of the feedback practices at Next Jump were covered in a handful of pages in the book.
Research Approach

In this study, I utilized organizational ethnography, an inductive, qualitative inquiry that is well suited to grasp complex organizational processes (Ybema, Yanow, Wels, & Kamsteeg, 2009), and for the study of “how” questions (Creswell, 1998). I employed ethnography to explore the complexity of how an organization builds a feedback culture with the goals of fostering individual growth, what forms do the specific practices take, and what is the personal experience of engaging in such feedback interactions from the perspective of its members. These foci reflect my research questions mentioned above and the dearth of research on feedback interactions in situ. An ethnographic approach allowed me to study feedback interactions within the real-world dynamics of organizational life, a perspective that has been missing from the feedback literature (Anseel et al., 2013; Harrison & Dossinger, 2017). It also illuminates “localized understanding of the cultural processes” (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 4) in organizations from a variety of vantage points. For this study, it meant, for example, studying interactions and experiences from the perspectives of those giving and receiving feedback, while exploring the dynamics and priorities being navigated by senior members. Further, the ethnographic approach permitted me to observe and explore feedback comments at multiple instances in time, rather than have a one-time snapshot view of the feedback interactions. This study is part of the burgeoning shift in organizational ethnography investigations, from attempts to “grasp the overall gestalt of the organization” to following specific organizational practices, objects or individuals (Ybema et al., p. 5).
Data Collection

Consistent with an ethnographic approach, I spent considerable time on the ground and gathered data from a wide variety of sources. My study began in October 2017, and I collected the majority of the data that I draw upon in this dissertation by July 2018. I spent over 300 hours at the site, during which I conducted participant observations, interviews, and analyzed archival data. Below I discuss each of these data sources in detail (Appendix A provides a summary of data sources).

Except for the co-CEOs Charlie Kim and Meghan Messenger, throughout this study, I refer to employees in any position or role as “members.” In one instance, in Chapter 3, I use a pseudonym (“Ursula”) when referring to a member’s experience of receiving feedback. Further, when data regarding important institutional priorities and goals reflected the perspectives of not only the co-CEOs but also two other senior-most members of the company, I use the term “senior members” to refer to this quartet of four leaders who collectively constituted the “strategy team” at Next Jump and were the highest decision-making body within the company. Along with the “strategy team,” every year the company’s employees voted to nominate fellow employees on the company’s “senior leadership team.” As will be clearer in subsequent chapters, members of this senior leadership team were uniquely positioned to give in-person feedback at Next Jump’s signature feedback programs. I use the term “senior leadership members” when referencing members of this annually elected senior leadership team in their roles as feedback-givers.

Participant observations. I began conducting participant observations in multiple settings starting from February 2018. These included observations during daily interactions in the office, signature feedback programs, organization-wide events, and feedback interactions in other settings. Beginning February 2018, for around six months I visited the
site, in its Cambridge, MA location, 3-4 days a week, assuming the schedule of an active member of the organization. I typically spent a full day at the office, conducting observations of the feedback programs, observing members in their daily interactions, engaging with members in informal conversations, as well as writing field memos, and transcribing data. During the initial phase of the study from October 2017 to January 2018, my observations of Next Jump’s feedback programs were limited to two company-wide events (detailed below). In addition, consistent with my research approach, through the course of the study, I supported the organization by conducting and synthesizing reviews of literatures on topics such as feedback, decision-making, and organizational culture. I also generated a white paper and other internal material on the role and importance of feedback.

Given my research questions, I focused my observations on two structured mechanisms through which members gave and received feedback: “Leadership 10X” and “Situational Workshop” programs. My sample included those members who granted me access to their sessions. I observed a total of five Leadership 10X meetings and six Situational Workshop sessions. These observations included a total of 30 Next Jump members receiving feedback and nine different members giving in-person feedback. I conducted the majority of these observations in-person. On three occasions when I could not join a meeting, the video recordings and/or transcript from the meeting were made available to me. The Situational Workshops were not recorded. During these observations, I took handwritten notes. My fieldnotes centered on various dimensions of the feedback interaction such as the content of the feedback comment, the nature of the conversation (e.g., who seems to be driving the discussions and the relative talk-time of those giving versus those receiving feedback), and how feedback-receivers framed the topic or problem when they presented in the meeting. When I observed different members offering feedback
as part of the same program (e.g., Situational Workshop), I paid special attention to the
differences in style and approach of feedback-giving and whether these variations were
related to factors such as tenure or seniority of the feedback-givers.

In my fieldwork, I also spent considerable time observing approximately eight
organization-wide events, including workshops, recruiting events, and two programs for
employee recognition. For example, I observed the program, “Leadership Academy,” during
which non-Next Jump individuals and organizations got an immersive experience in the
company's culture, including the feedback practices. I also observed the company’s day-long
hiring event, “Super Saturday,” during which potential hires were assessed on a variety of
dimensions include their humility, authenticity, and on how they approach giving and
receiving of feedback. Observing these recurring institutional events helped me build a more
nuanced and real-time understanding of the senior members5 views on the goals and nature
of feedback within the organization and the ways in which feedback was integrated into the
organization’s culture. In addition, I also attended the company’s annual employee
recognition award ceremony and a few instances of the end-of-the-week gatherings during
which members appreciated co-workers who had “helped them succeed” during that week.
Recognition programs at Next Jump were outside the scope of this study; as stated earlier,
this study focused on the “developmental” feedback initiatives at Next Jump. However,
these observations of the rituals and instances when members offered positive
acknowledgment provided me a more comprehensive perspective on the nature of the
feedback culture as a whole, and the individual characteristics and behaviors that were valued
within the company.

5 As stated earlier, the term “senior members” refers to the co-CEOs plus two of the senior-most leaders in the
company who comprise the “strategy team.”
In addition to observations of the two main feedback programs and company-wide events, I also observed other instances of feedback interactions which did not take place with the same regularity and consistency. These interactions were often part of the company’s ongoing internal experiments or vestiges of an older program that was being iterated. Observing these feedback interactions opened the window further into the nature, frequency, and emphasis of feedback interactions and how feedback was integrated into the culture of the company.

About six months after I began the study, I was offered access to an internal digital feedback platform which members used for providing feedback on a regular basis. For the purpose of this study, I only assessed feedback comments on the specific feedback interactions related to the Leadership 10X program sessions.

**Interviews.** I augmented the participant observations with 40 semi-structured interviews with 30 participants. Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. I conducted all interviews in-person except for one interview which I held over Skype. I began the first set of interviews approximately one month after I had begun daily participant observations to ensure that my presence was normalized in the team and after I had observed enough feedback interactions to identify salient themes to pursue during the interviews.

In selecting members to interview, I prioritized individuals whom I had observed in feedback interactions – either as givers or receivers. I did this for three reasons. First, it allowed me to anchor the conversation in a particular instance that we had both observed and which we could reference. Second, it allowed me to explore the experience and feeling of giving or receiving feedback with the participants. Third, during the interview, I could triangulate the inferences and assumptions I had made from having observed the interaction. To gain a more extensive representation of perspectives across the organization (e.g., tenure
and gender), I also requested interviews from members whom I had not observed during feedback interactions but had engaged with during my daily observations. Finally, I conducted follow-up interviews with nine members to pursue salient themes that had emerged since our first interview, or because the initial interview occurred before I had the opportunity to observe them in the process of receiving or giving feedback.

During the interviews, I explored a range of questions (see Appendix B for interview protocol): what were the members’ primary sources of most meaningful feedback; differences in approach to in-person and anonymous feedback; the approach members took when giving and getting feedback; what members did after they had received the feedback. For those members whom I had observed giving and receiving in-person feedback (e.g., in Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops), I also asked open-ended questions about their experience during the feedback interactions and how they processed the feedback (if they were the receivers). I audio recorded every interview and transcribed them verbatim.

In addition to in-person interviews, I also engaged in frequent email communications with senior members, during which senior members presented their ongoing thinking behind the architecture of the feedback programs, including the history and evolution of the feedback practices, definitions of what constitutes helpful and unhelpful feedback, and the goal of an organization-wide emphasis on feedback.

**Archival data.** I reviewed videos related to the company’s culture and feedback practices, including talks given by senior members which were available either on the company’s website or on its YouTube channel. These videos provided me with a better understanding of the goals, intents, and nature of feedback from the perspective of the organization’s senior leadership.
Data Analysis

Data analysis was an iterative and ongoing process during and after data collection. I based my analysis on grounded theory (Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which is an approach that “adapts well to capturing the complexities of the context in which the action unfolds, enabling researchers to better understand all that may be involved in a particular substantive issue” (Locke, 2001, p. 95). During the data collection process, I wrote memos to document emergent findings, surprises, and patterns in the data (Charmaz, 2006). This early and ongoing engagement with the data allowed me to be responsive to insights emerging from the data, and to adapt and refine my instruments and focus accordingly (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). For example, although my original intent was to study the individual experiences and perspectives from the vantage point of the feedback-receiver, early on in my data collection I was struck by the closely intertwined nature of feedback giving and receiving at the site, which seemed “theoretically novel” (Harrison & Rouse, 2015, p. 380). Thus, to gain a broader understanding of the phenomenon of feedback giving, I began documenting and investigating the feedback-giver perspectives, experiences, and comments in my observations and interviews.

Research question #1. To answer my first research question, what are the different mechanisms through which Next Jump members receive feedback and how are these feedback practices enacted in situ, I focused the analysis on 1) the core principles and architecture of the feedback system, 2) the content of the feedback comments that were given, and 3) the responses of feedback-receivers to the feedback. To do this, I relied heavily

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6 The original emphasis on feedback-receiver was guided by 1) desire to contain the scope of the study, 2) assumption that I was unlikely to get the opportunity to study both giving and receiving perspectives in-depth and 3) belief from review of extant feedback research that learning from feedback was largely a matter of how the individual received and processed the feedback (as the receiver).
on the data from observations of feedback interactions in the two main feedback programs – Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops – and complemented them with member interviews and email communications with senior members.

In the first step of my analysis, I reviewed the observation notes, memos, email communications with senior members, and videos to develop a set of thematic codes reflective of the key features of the main feedback programs (Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops). I relied primarily on email communications with the co-CEOs and observations of talks and trainings led by the senior members to distill the important assumptions, beliefs, and principles guiding the feedback architecture. This analysis pointed to the primary ways in which members gave and received “developmental” feedback at Next Jump. The thematic codes I developed through this analysis included codes such as “public nature” and “anonymity” which highlighted important elements of the feedback programs, while “candor” and “empathy” emerged as key attributes of ‘good’ feedback from the perspective of the senior members.

Second, to understand the nature and content of the feedback comments given during these programs in greater depth, I began by inductively coding the feedback comments – those given in-person as well as those delivered anonymously through the digital feedback application. I used an open coding logic at this stage which is “designed to break open the data to consider all possible meanings” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 59). This process resulted in in-vivo codes drawn from verbatim phrases such as “appreciate your vulnerability,” and “your practice is too will powered.” I used this strategy to categorize what the feedback-givers were conveying through the comments.

As the last step, I engaged in axial coding. Here I developed a set of codes which reflects the connections between the in-vivo codes I had developed previously (Charmaz,
In this process, I first identified what in-vivo codes were repeated (or not) within a given feedback interaction. Next, I looked across feedback interactions within the same program to determine what in-vivo codes were repeated or not. Finally, looking across the two different feedback programs (Leadership 10X, Situational Workshop) I carried out the same process of identifying repeated in-vivo codes. This analysis generated a set of five ‘moves’ which feedback-givers used to provide feedback. For example, in considering the reoccurrence of in-vivo codes such as “this is the most vulnerable I have seen you,” “I think you have become more self-aware,” and “it was an honest and decent presentation,” I identified a move used by feedback-givers to communicate affirmation.

In addition, I analyzed the nature of the interaction between the feedback-givers and feedback-receivers, such as who was speaking at what points and in what sequence. The data for this process was drawn from my observation notes, email communications with senior members, and interviews with members about their experience with receiving feedback. Through this process, I identified a set of actions that feedback-receivers took after the feedback interaction was over, including “sharing emotions,” “reflecting on and processing the comments,” “sharing key takeaways,” and using the feedback to change actions.

**Research question #2.** To analyze my second set of research questions, how do members experience giving and getting feedback, I drew on semi-structured interviews as the primary data source. After the interviews were conducted, I developed detailed memos to document recurring themes, emerging patterns, and salient quotes. I developed a set of codes based on the themes identified in these memos, my interview protocols, and my review of the interview transcripts. For example, across every interview, members spontaneously explained how they tended to think, act, and feel via statements such as, I am a person of “extremes,” “arrogant,” “willpower driven,” or someone who has a “hard time
sharing struggles.” From these statements, I generated the code “self-knowledge,” which eventually became part of the category “change,” one of the three dimensions of the individual experience of the feedback culture.

Validity. Similar to any ethnography, this dissertation reflects a snapshot of Next Jump’s culture of feedback and is neither presented as and nor is it to be read as a single universal “truth” about the company. While my rendering of the feedback culture tries to be accurate, the narrative in these pages is as much a reflection of my particular experience in collecting and analyzing the data. With this in view, I used three approaches to maximize the rigor of my data analysis and findings. As noted earlier, I wrote memos regularly, a process which helped me keep track of the assumptions I was making (Charmaz, 2006). I combined this with a constant effort to seek out “dissonant voices” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) that challenged my tacit assumptions and which helped me maintain a sense of surprise even after an immersive time in the field. During the ongoing analysis, I triangulated data from each of the different sources – observations, interviews, emails, the digital platform, and the archival material – so that I could reduce the “systematic biases or limitations of a specific method” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 75).

Researcher Positionality

As in any ethnographic study, my personal, reflexive stance was significant to the process and validity of the ethnographic findings detailed in this dissertation (Luttrell, 2009). Despite being immersed in the context of Next Jump for a lengthy duration, I still was an outsider in the setting of a global technology business in Cambridge, MA. My previous work experience had focused within the field of education and taken place primarily in my home country of India. Despite the difference in context, I began the study with several years of
thinking, experimenting, and working on questions of organizational culture. In fact, this study has its roots in a question that I have been working with for close to a decade: what would it look like for organizations to be spaces that cultivated people’s personal capacities? What would be the nature of interpersonal interactions in such a context? I came to these questions from working for several years in India in an organization and with a community where we had experimented with efforts to promote a culture of personal development and critical reflection on the self. This experience was personally foundational to me, and I was fully aware that I brought this prior learning – and its related biases – to this present study.

Over time, many aspects of the broader culture at Next Jump, such as the emphases on transparency, vulnerability, and self-awareness, began to ring familiar. My intimate understanding of experiencing and engaging in organizational feedback complicated my ‘outsider’ positionality. But it also sharpened my empathic imagination of members’ experiences and facilitated rapport building.

Immersing and embedding myself in a feedback-thick context such as Next Jump that highly valued self-awareness, transparency, and “getting into the arena” (quick action and iteration), meant that over time I too experienced some of the expectations associated with being a “Next Jumper.” For example, on the occasions that I presented insights from feedback research within the company, I was offered critical feedback about my style of presentation and content of the presentation. I was also offered personal feedback by senior members that I had a tendency for perfection and was uncomfortable with taking quick action. Wearing the hat of the feedback-receivers during those moments, for example, gave me a first-hand sense of some of the experiences that members subsequently shared about navigating feedback. I utilized reflexive memos to sustain an awareness of these dynamics.
To conclude, while researchers have emphasized the role of feedback interactions in advancing learning, there exist few empirical portrayals of feedback interactions that are set within the real-life dynamics of organizational life, and where feedback is used for purposes other than for performance evaluations. Next Jump is a distinct organizational context with novel approaches to intentionally direct and deploy feedback interactions for the personal learning of its employees. Thus, in this study, I examine the various feedback practices, the assumptions, and beliefs which undergird the feedback architecture, and the employee experience of navigating a feedback-rich culture. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the nature of feedback interactions from the perspectives of the feedback givers and receivers and one that is firmly anchored within the daily rhythms of the workplace.
Chapter 3: Design of Feedback: Core Principles and Programs

In this chapter, I explore crucial elements of how feedback is organized within Next Jump. I start by laying out the belief held by senior members that, while every member can fundamentally “upgrade” themselves, the propensity to conceal weaknesses and project a more favorable front hinders personal growth. I then describe the key assumptions senior members held about the role that feedback played in creating (or hindering) an environment where people did not engage in self-protective “lying, hiding, faking” behaviors. I also describe the attributes that emerged from these beliefs about what constitutes ‘good quality’ feedback. I end with a description of how the company had ritualized feedback interactions and leveraged technology with the intent of honing members’ feedback giving and receiving skills.

Potential, Impediments, and Feedback

Charlie Kim adjusted his collar mike as he addressed a packed room of senior leaders representing businesses, military, and non-profits, who were attending the company’s three-day Leadership Academy. In this monthly event which the company offered free of charge to a select number of invited participants, Next Jump offered participants a deep-dive, experiential view of its culture, including its various feedback programs.7

In this opening presentation of the Academy, Kim traced the evolution of the company, and why the senior members placed such an emphasis on developing people and culture. About halfway through the presentation, Kim pulled up a slide with an image of a car that had broken down, fumes emanating from its various parts. An equation appeared,

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7 Leadership Academies were aligned with the company’s mission to “change the world by changing workplace culture.” Simultaneously the Academy also represented the company’s belief in “teaching” and giving back to the world what it was good at (e.g., cultural innovations).
scrawled across the image: \( \text{Performance} = \text{potential} - \text{impediments} \). These notions of “potential” and “impediments” captured important beliefs held by senior members, which in turn shaped how feedback was designed and implemented.

Clarifying the equation, Kim shared with the group that “every individual is a diamond in the rough and needs coaching to fulfill their potential…You don’t give up on people. Our belief is that every individual should and will get there.” Kim was conveying a view that was often voiced in the company, that with the right support, every member can overcome their personal limitations and become “better versions of themselves.” On a different occasion, during a hiring event, Kim shared this sentiment to a room full of candidates, “No matter how high you think you want to go, I promise you, we can help you go even higher.” Co-CEO Meghan Messenger often recounted her journey in the company as a testament to this core belief. She joined the company 20 years ago as an intern, and three years back took on the role of the co-CEO of the company – a reflection, she emphasized, of the company’s unrelenting belief in “people’s ability to fundamentally grow.”

However, as the rest of the equation on that slide denoted, “potential” was not enough to achieve high performance. Senior members believed that a foundational “impediment” that undermined people’s efforts to realize their potential and growth, was the tendency to “hide the truth of who we are because we are scared of looking bad.” They emphasized that in most workplaces people concealed their real emotions and thoughts and instead projected a more self-assured, confident, and successful image of themselves. This echoed the idea in the following quote, printed on a massive poster and placed prominently in the company’s offices:

In an ordinary organization, most people are doing a second job no one is paying them for… most people are spending time and energy covering up their weaknesses, managing other people’s impressions of them, showing themselves to their best
advantage, playing politics, hiding inadequacies, hiding their uncertainties, hiding their limitations. Hiding” (Kegan & Lahey, 2016, p. 1).

This notion that in typical workplaces, people suppress their emotions and thoughts and instead project an inauthentic positive impression, was captured at Next Jump in a pithy phrase, that Messenger had coined – “lying, hiding, faking (LHF).” Illustrating the concept in a company-wide talk on the subject in 2012, Messenger shared her experience during a meeting back in 2006, when she had felt “so insecure” to admit that “I have no idea what we are really talking about.” She went on, “I walked out trying to hide this unconfident version of myself.” Messenger’s openness during the talk was notable because as the company’s co-CEO by opening up she was sending a signal that anyone could be vulnerable to this instinct, that it was part of one’s humanness. At the same time, she was demonstrating how being forthright about these incidents could be an act of transparency and authenticity.

“Most companies are built as LHF machines,” Charlie Kim remarked, adding that “there is very little understanding about how much energy goes into trying to look good, and how it shows up in lying, hiding, faking forms… [in the] hidden agendas, the unspoken passive aggressiveness. All this leads to erosion of trust. Teams become ineffective, and definitely, do not operate and run as high-performance units.” Kim likened “lying, hiding, faking” behaviors to perpetually having “one foot on the brake.” He maintained that people could not achieve their true potential or perform at high levels in their jobs, “if you cannot face up to the truth of who you are really are.” Over time, the senior members at Next Jump came to consider and organize feedback with an eye towards its role in fostering a culture which helps people admit their weaknesses, own up to areas where they need help, and be ok with not knowing.
Feedback to Counter “LHF” Tendencies

Senior members at Next Jump believed that the quality of feedback giving and receiving in any organization either exaggerated or lowered people’s tendencies to hide mistakes, lie through their failures, and fake in the face of personal flaws. From their perspective, if feedback-receivers always reacted against the feedback-givers – for their efforts to give them their honest views – with defensiveness, anger, or justifications, it would hurt the quality and likelihood of honest feedback-giving; over time, it would reduce the willingness of people to offer candid feedback. Moreover, if people consistently buffered and resisted critical feedback, it would create an “echo chamber” effect that reinforced their biases and blind spots. Similarly, if feedback-givers constantly self-censored their real views and feelings due to the fears that expressing these perspectives could harm their interpersonal relationships and career advancement, they would lower the “circulation of truth” in the organization.

Against this backdrop, Next Jump’s senior members conveyed a deep skepticism about – what they saw as – two typical approaches to giving feedback: couch the criticisms between inauthentic praise or convey critical feedback only in private. They emphasized that the first approach of expressing negative feedback in positive terms tended to hurt people’s ability to speak freely and independently and limited people’s capacity to confront hard truths about themselves. At the same time, senior members frequently highlighted what they saw to be two key advantages of giving feedback in a public setting rather than during private, confidential interactions. Kim put it as “old adage of praise in public and criticize in private.” First, the presence of other employees served as a form of quality check on the comments. From this perspective, the person giving the feedback was likely to be more deliberate and conscious about the fact that the comment was going to be heard by more
people than just the receiver, and thus presumably would approach the comment with greater thought. Moreover, those witnessing the interaction could now assess and weigh-in on the quality of the feedback comment. That is, if for example, they found the comment inappropriate or unfair they could potentially flag the comment and the feedback-giver, thereby enforcing a form of “community accountability” about the quality of the comments.

A second upshot, according to Kim, of making feedback interactions public was that it let the receivers know that they were “not alone” in getting critical feedback. As Kim explained, “if you want people to develop (growth vs. fixed mindset,) you first have to make them not feel alone. The act of seeing other people… getting critical feedback will give courage employee to employee.”

Senior members thus believed that the quality and nature of feedback giving and receiving had a significant impact on the flow of honest communication in any company. Consistent with this belief, feedback was frequently compared to a “psychological mirror” that helped people become aware of their blind spots, biases, and unhelpful mental tendencies. This view of feedback was vividly captured in a cartoon (see figure 1 below) that was often used in the company when describing the approach and philosophy on feedback to an external audience. In this image, feedback was presented as the “unpleasant truth” that people needed to hear in order to learn and improve; but as the empty booth indicated, few people wanted to give or receive such comments. On the other hand, senior members believed that feedback as typically given in many organizations was closer to being “comforting lies,” which – as the long line showed – people were generally happier to give and receive.
Referring to the above figure, Kim emphasized that as difficult as it was to stand in the line for unpleasant truths, “the harder job is of the person standing behind the booth. Try to sit in the booth to give the truth to someone. It’s a craft… [giving] comforting lies is much easier.” As this quote conveyed, giving feedback was also construed as giving someone the “truth.” A senior member clarified that “truth” was not a single right perspective or a fundamental reality. Instead, in his perspective, it was a person’s instinct or reaction in a given moment; it was not always right or valid and did not have to be. Kim and Messenger highlighted that people needed to share their ‘true’ thoughts and feelings if there was to be any hope of learning and improving. This construction of feedback – as a “mirror” that helped people gain awareness of their biases and weaknesses, and through which the feedback-givers conveyed “unpleasant truths” to those receiving it – highlighted three
fundamental notions at Next Jump, about the kind of feedback that best countered the “lying, hiding, faking” tendencies in an organization.

The first attribute of ‘good’ feedback within Next Jump, was that the comment should pry beneath the “half-truths,” fronts, and impressions that feedback-receivers were likely projecting during the interaction. The operating assumption was that those receiving feedback were consciously, or otherwise, acting to protect themselves from embarrassment, shame, or feelings of vulnerability. In such a scenario, Kim contended, feedback-givers needed to act as “effective sensors” or “human probes” to reveal what was really going on during the interaction. He noted: “human beings are better lie detectors than any other machine.” Thus, the expectation from feedback-givers was that through their comments they should reveal the underlying dynamics, or aspects of the situation that the feedback-receiver may desire to conceal as a self-protective measure. Within this narrative, feedback-giving was, as Kim shared, “reading and sharing poker tells, everyone’s LHF [lying, hiding, faking]… put it on the table for others to see.”

Second, giving such feedback required the feedback-givers to marshal their “intuitions” during the feedback interactions. The company’s senior members drew a sharp distinction between “System 2 feedback,” which they argued was more “logical, thought out, reflective feedback,” and “System 1 feedback” that conveyed the feedback-giver’s “reactive, visceral, gut, and intuition.” While they acknowledged that the reflective, logical feedback and way of thinking was important and had its place in decision making, they emphasized that when individuals over-relied on the “System 2” way of thinking, and under-

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8 References to “System 1” and “System 2” are borrowed from Daniel Kahneman’s (2011) research into the distinct modes of decision-making that individuals tend to employ. In Kahneman’s work, “System 1” represents an automatic, fast, and even unconscious way of thinking, while “System 2” stands for more effortful, slow, and controlled decision-making that demands greater cognitive energy.
trained their “System 1” intuitions, there was a greater risk of “lying, hiding, faking” behaviors. “When people speak slowly, carefully picking their words: it is system 2,” Kim said, adding, “when it is visceral and fast, we all know it is the truth, it is their train of thought out loud: System 1.” Thus, the second key feature of ‘good’ feedback from this perspective, was that the comment reflected the feedback-giver’s gut reactions and instincts on the topic or presentation, rather than an overly deliberated response.

The third characteristic of ‘good’ feedback according to the senior members was the ways in which the comment balanced honesty and empathy. To what degree would members share their candid opinions and feelings when giving feedback to their peer or superior? How would they act on their instinct to empathize with the person getting the feedback? What were the relative costs of being imbalanced on either side? Consistent with the idea that feedback-givers should listen to their intuitive reactions during the interaction, and identify attempts at “lying, hiding, faking,” there seemed to be a heavier emphasis on candor of the feedback comment, as compared to the empathy it might convey. This perspective followed from the view held by senior members that there were great pulls and pressures leading people away from honestly sharing their views and feelings in the workplace – especially when these might be negative or risk creating any discomfort during the interaction. Kim viewed the question of balancing candor and empathy during a feedback interaction, ultimately, as a problem of sequencing, of what came first. “Practice being direct first… it takes time to build up muscles of giving truth with empathy,” he emphasized, adding that, “you have to learn how to do it… and like most muscles, you might rip some before you get stronger.” From his perspective, “truth” and “empathy” were both important elements of effective feedback, and in an ideal scenario, they would be in a harmonious balance in the comment. But senior members emphasized that while employees developed
the skills to give such balanced feedback, candor was harder – and more important – to muster up than empathy. Moreover, there was also a widespread skepticism amongst the senior members that often, what passed as empathy during feedback in a typical workplace was in fact “inauthentic kindness” masquerading as positive feedback.

Kim often referred to the “Radical Candor” framework proposed by author Kim Scott (2011) to explain the company’s thinking on this aspect of feedback. This framework suggests that feedback comments vary along two dimensions: “challenge directly” and “care personally” and feedback that is high on both of these measures embodies the ideal characteristic of “radical candor.” In contrast, critical feedback which is high on candor and low on empathy, results in “obnoxious aggression,” while feedback that overdoes empathy and is low on candor reflects “ruinous empathy.” In a meeting with a few of his senior members, Kim referenced this framework to explain the tension in balancing candor and empathy when giving feedback.

If you are not practiced at telling the truth, it comes across as really bad, obnoxious aggression… That is the price you have to pay to learn to do this right. And if you don’t, you will get to a place where eventually you move from ruinous empathy and go to manipulative insincerity. Lots of people say that I would rather stay in ruinous empathy… but the problem is you will get stuck at these places.

As this quote suggests, there was a shared view amongst the senior members that people were generally on guard against the risks of overdoing candor because of the fear that it could make the feedback and the person giving it come across as aggressive, insulting, or as an act of “obnoxious aggression.” Another explanation of people’s hesitation to be candid could be that the person at the receiving end may not be able to take it in due to heightened anxiety – a theme that comes up more prominently in later chapters. Yet there was a stronger, countervailing perspective voiced by the senior members, that most companies did not recognize the costs of over-prioritizing, misdirecting, and mistiming empathy during a
feedback interaction, which could be equally harmful in realizing a productive learning experience.

From the perspective of senior members, feedback which revealed people’s “lying, hiding, faking” tendencies and nudged individuals to leverage their intuition, resulted in better quality “data” and therefore improved decision-making. In fact, they proposed that training people in the workplace to give such feedback – where they are drawing on their intuitions about what is perhaps missing – was essential to developing strong leadership.

In later chapters, I will describe how these multitudes of expectations about what constitutes ‘good’ feedback – “probing,” revealing “lying, hiding, faking,” marshaling “intuition,” and prioritizing candor over empathy – intersected and impacted the overall tone and quality of the feedback in the company, and how members made sense of these expectations when providing feedback. But first, in the rest of this chapter, I turn my attention to how these expectations and beliefs about feedback were realized in everyday practice at Next Jump, through its novel feedback programs. As I describe below, the strategy of combining face-to-face feedback and online digital feedback – two distinct modalities for giving feedback – was a seeming lynchpin in this effort. It was further complemented with two distinct contexts or programs, “10X” and “Situational Workshops,” which ensured that feedback interactions took place at regular and frequent intervals.

Feedback Programs Across Distinct Modalities and Contexts

Leveraging Digital and Anonymous Feedback

The “feedback app” was a digital application that was designed about a decade back by Next Jump’s senior engineers so that employees could give each other anonymous feedback. Leaving feedback included writing a qualitative comment (less than 1000 words)
and giving a rating from 1 to 4 where 1 stood for below expectations, 2 for meets expectations, 3 for exceeds expectations, and 4 for far exceeds expectations. Moreover, while the feedback-giver stayed anonymous in this mobile application, the name of the receiver (and comments he or she received) was made visible. My analysis revealed a surprising level of consistency in the tone and themes of the feedback comments, which I will explore more fully in the later chapters.

Within the company, these two features of the “feedback app” (1) masking the identity of the individual giving the feedback and (2) revealing who was receiving the feedback alongside the comments they had received were thought to be crucial for creating an environment in which people were supported to not give in to their tendencies to “lie, hide, fake.” Senior members emphasized that, for example, the chance to give anonymous feedback could blunt some of the common concerns that limited people from speaking up with their true thoughts and feelings: fear that they might hurt a dear friend, a trusting peer or coach, or get fired or otherwise penalized by superiors for sharing critical feedback. They also shared that anonymity for the feedback-giver could help people prioritize substance over delivery in their comments. That is, once people knew that those receiving the comments could not identify them, they could potentially be more direct with their feedback comment and less concerned with whether they were using the ‘right’ tone – a preoccupation that senior members believed increased the chances of “lying, hiding, faking.”

Co-CEO Messenger elaborated this point in her email to a division leader with whom she had interacted during a coaching session. “You are being careful to choose your words,” she said, adding that “it suggests you are trying to get it right, not look bad, maybe hide something, versus the way you would speak to a friend… just off the cuff/ frank speak/no filter.”
Senior members shared that the rationale behind exposing the feedback comments and the receiver’s identity was to lower the embarrassment and shame that people felt or associated with getting critical feedback. They noted that when everyone could see everyone else’s feedback comments (with names), it would help to normalize the typically painful experience of getting such feedback. Doing so would challenge the mistaken assumption people had that they were the only ones getting harsh feedback, which could, in turn, mitigate the tendency for impression management and “office politics.” Kim and Messenger hoped that over time, as people saw that even senior members, or managers and peers they admired, were getting critical feedback, it would increase the willingness and capacity of employees to put themselves in situations that were out of their comfort zone but were nonetheless vital for their learning.

An additional way that the company augmented the feeling of safety for its members, to give and receive critical feedback, was through its novel “no-firing policy.” Kim introduced a company-wide “no firing policy” in 2012, committing to not let-go of employees for reasons such as below-par performance and to instead explore other ways to support and coach people to do better. As Kim explained, “we make you a job offer which is guaranteed employment for life. You can leave if you want, but we will commit to you. We don’t fire you; we coach you.” The underlying intention with this policy, senior members shared, was to give employees the safety net that would encourage them to take risks, fail, be themselves and most importantly not be afraid to speak up with their real thoughts and feelings. As Messenger had put it in her “no LHF” talk to the company, “if you say in this company that I have no idea what I am doing, you will not be fired.” Instead, at Next Jump, the admission and awareness of one’s weaknesses tended to be viewed as a strength.
The “feedback app” was designed to complement in-person feedback-giving in the company, and it existed in tandem with interactions in which the feedback was delivered face-to-face. As I explore next, the scaling of this “feedback app” was closely tied to the company’s longest-running signature feedback program, the 10X.

**Signature Feedback Program “10X”**

10X was the longest-running feedback program at Next Jump. It began over a decade ago as a way for the company’s engineers to showcase the “cool” codes or products they had built, and to receive in-person feedback from the co-CEOs and anonymous feedback in the “app” from those attending the presentations. In its early version, 10X was more of a competition, in which the engineer to “win” the 10X was presented as being ten times (10X) better than the average engineer. Over time though, 10X shed its garb of a hard-won competition and instead became a platform for members to reflect upon and demonstrate to the company how they had personally developed over a period of time, and how they were working on improving on aspects of their characters or personalities that mattered to them – such as speaking up more freely, taking on challenging conversations, or getting more comfortable with admitting vulnerabilities. This eventually resulted in the company’s “Leadership 10X” program in which every Next Jump member presented, once a year, in front of the whole company on his or her “personal journey” and received in-person and anonymous feedback (see figure 2 below for a representation of the set-up of the “10X” program). Below I offer a portrait of one member’s Leadership 10X presentation.
Ursula’s Leadership 10X presentation. Ursula⁹ walked to the front of the room adjusting her collar mike and straightened some leaves of paper in front of her. She met the eyes of three members of the company’s senior-leadership team, sitting close to her, who would give her the in-person feedback at the end of her presentation. With a warm and inviting smile, she faced the room. In front of her, the two long rustic wooden community style tables were starting to get packed, as Next Jump members settled down to listen to her presentation. Colleagues were also tuning-in virtually from other offices. This was Ursula’s first Leadership 10X presentation in over a year. She had joined Next Jump a decade back and since then had led several significant initiatives for the company. However, in the past few months, she had faced several transitions, including – most recently – moving into a new role and co-leading a major initiative.

⁹ As noted in Chapter 2, this is a pseudonym.
Right at the outset of the presentation, Ursula noted that she was “seeking feedback on what I am missing in my growth areas.” Then, she went on to share the context which brought her to today’s meeting: “So, the past few years for me have been pretty messy. I have been in a swamp, and it has been hard to talk about this in the public forum. A couple of years ago I was removed from being a lead on a team, and kind of moved from that position.” She went on to share how she was perceived to be “uncoachable” and had developed a “reputation that I won’t help others.” The room seemed to be in rapt attention. There were a few sympathetic nods. Some people took notes. Ursula’s steady gaze and effortless smile did not conceal her misty eyes or the catch in her throat. But with a barely perceptible pause, she continued, naming the growth area that she had already hinted at the start of her presentation: “I have a brand of being a black box… that I am not very transparent, that it is really hard to read what is on my mind.” Over the next few minutes, she tried to unpack the behaviors and consequences – for example, “not sharing my point of view because I am afraid of looking dumb and inconsistent” – of being a “black box.” As her five minutes drew to a close, Ursula shared how she had been chipping away at this growth area. “My practices over the past year” she went on, “have been around attacking how to become no LHF [lying, hiding, faking], and for me that is just practicing being vulnerable, sharing problems without the solutions and commitment.” She ended her presentation with the same words as almost every other presenter at a 10X did: “please give me feedback on what I am missing.”

Once the timer rang, the room fell in silent coordinated movement as people who had watched the presentation, whether in-person or virtually, had the chance to leave anonymous feedback for Ursula. The three senior leadership members seemed to use this time to gather their thoughts, read their notes, and made some new ones. The timer buzzed
and signaled the start of the next phase of this interaction; all three senior leadership members, on cue, held up a table tennis racquet repurposed as a sign to give the feedback rating – all 1s – for Ursula’s presentation. In this final segment of the 10X, each of the three senior members had around two minutes each to give Ursula their qualitative comments. The feedback ranged from acknowledging that Ursula was sharing something that was not easy, to pointing out that the presentation felt “victimy” in the sense that “others are giving you this backhand versus you truly believe that it is something I need to work on.” Two of them pointed out that she had come across as “angry” in the presentation, which they offered was potentially a sign that she had not yet fully processed the emotions. In contrast, one senior leader emphasized Ursula’s past successes, her “potential” and “capabilities” as a motivation for the “possibilities” in front of her. During this entire time, Ursula stayed at the podium from where she had presented, writing notes from the feedback she was being provided. When her turn to present ended, in addition to the verbal comments she had received from the three senior leadership members, 50 anonymous comments had been given via the mobile application.

The shift in emphasis in the 10X from “technical presentation” to personal development – as reflected in Ursula’s Leadership 10X presentation – emerged from the “repeated patterns of errors” that Kim and Messenger had noticed when giving feedback to their colleagues. As Kim shared, “it [feedback] was always tied to psychological shortfalls and almost never technical/cognitive shortfalls. Never a presentation, powerpoint, excel, coding issue. It had to do with character imbalances. Too confident, optimistic, courageous. Or too pessimistic, cautious, slow moving.”

With an eye towards the potential of the 10X format to engage members regularly in giving and receiving feedback and generating a large volume of feedback for the receivers,
senior members had expanded and systematized the program over time; distinct “10X” sessions were now conducted in the company – “leadership,” “engineering,” “sales,” “product,” and “revenue” – and each kind of 10X emphasized different areas or skills for development. Further, the basic format for these 10X programs stayed the same; only the topic of presentation differed depending on the kind of 10X. Thus, each session began with a five- or 10-minute presentation on a topic and was followed by two or three minutes for those in attendance to give their feedback anonymously through the “app.” The session culminated in two or three senior leadership members giving in-person feedback to the presenter. The different 10X programs took place at different frequencies. For example, while a Leadership 10X was held once a month, a “revenue” 10X typically took place almost once a week. A dedicated team kept track of each program and interlaced the sessions such that during most weeks a 10X program was held in the company.

The dynamics of participating in the 10X programs – in the role of presenters/feedback-receivers and feedback-givers – were an interplay between personal initiative and nudges by the company. For the feedback-receiver, factors such as individual role, tenure, seniority in the organization, and the kind of 10X program affected participation. I found that senior members typically presented at regular intervals, while other members were encouraged to be proactive about participation. In the case of Leadership 10X, members were expected to present once a year and were often nudged by the scheduling team and coaches if they did not proactively offer to present.

From the perspective of giving feedback, irrespective of individual role or tenure, any member could attend any 10X program as an “audience member” and give feedback anonymously. If self-improvement was the rationale for members to participate in the 10X program as feedback-receivers, the goal for those giving feedback was to hone their
feedback skills by attending as many 10X programs as they could and leaving as many anonymous feedback comments as they could. This reflected a shift in the goals of the 10X in the last year – from primarily benefiting the feedback-receiver to a program that also, and crucially, offered everyone in the organization regular opportunities to develop their feedback-giving skills.

This was achieved in two ways. First, senior members emphasized that since the 10X program occurred every week and anyone could attend it, there were now regular and consistent chances for all members – including a day-old intern or newcomer – to “practice” giving feedback. Second, the 10X was presented within the company as a program that gave everyone in the audience the chance to learn how to give ‘good’ feedback by closely observing the senior leadership members who were the only members tasked with giving face-to-face feedback during the 10X. Thus, at Next Jump, senior leadership members did not simply give feedback, but were also “leading by example” and “teaching” feedback-giving skills. A senior leadership member reflecting on the evolution of the 10X program, shared, “the emphasis now is on the feedback. It is about… what feedback looks like so that others can compare and see if their feedback was right or wrong or was missing something. Presenters now are basically providing people with a case study and opportunity to practice giving feedback.” I explore this important feature of the 10X – that the senior leadership members modeled and taught good feedback giving skills to the rest of the company – in greater depth and from multiple vantage points across the dissertation. In the next chapter, I present findings from analyzing and comparing characteristics of feedback comments given in-person and through the digital feedback, and in a later chapter I describe the dynamics and tensions senior leadership members experienced from “teaching in public.”
The complex combination of Next Jump members volunteering and also being nudged by the organization to participate in receiving and giving feedback, highlighted an inherent paradox of feedback: getting negative feedback was challenging to give and receive but was also crucial for fostering self-improvement. Next Jump’s approach to navigating the disconnect that its leaders perceived between people’s desire for getting critical feedback and the value of feedback was, in part, to make feedback seeking and receiving into organization-wide rituals, through programs such as the 10X. This strategy reflected an often-cited perspective of the senior leadership members: learning any new skill or capability – including giving and receiving feedback – was like strengthening “muscles.” The 10X program, according to Kim and Messenger, created regular opportunities for members to practice giving and receiving critical feedback with consistency – a cornerstone of the company’s approach to learning and growth.

In summary, for Next Jump’s senior members, the combination of 10X and the “feedback app” was a crucial lever to encourage people to “speak up” with their opinions and perspectives. According to Kim, the 10X program had also played a pivotal role in enhancing the feedback-giving skills of his leadership team, in two main ways. One, it gave the novice, new-elected senior leadership members regular and consistent “practice” in giving in-person feedback in front of other company employees. Kim acknowledged that “stress” was built into the program design since those giving in-person feedback had only a handful of minutes to gather their thoughts and deliver feedback under the watchful scrutiny of the rest of the employees. Two, according to Kim, the 10X design of having two or more senior leadership members giving in-person feedback in any program was instrumental in enhancing the capacity for their independent thinking. Further, Kim and Messenger emphasized that the “diversity of thinking” that senior leadership members modeled during
the 10X illustrated to the company that senior leaders could hold and express “legitimate differing points of views” as reflected in their feedback comments. The co-CEOs considered this a key reason why, in their view, there was far less resistance to feedback from those in authority positions at Next Jump, and why feedback from senior leadership members during a 10X was, in general, considered valuable by those receiving the feedback. Kim explained:

This next generation is highly skeptical of feedback from authority figures. When a senior person gives critical feedback, it is believed to be part of their job… to be tough on you. And generally speaking its [feedback] rejected. However, what we consistently hear from visitors is disbelief seeing [Next Jump] junior 22 and 24-year olds are receiving feedback from senior leaders. Counter to the norm everywhere else.

I will explore this perspective in greater depth in Chapter 5 from the vantage point of those receiving feedback. For now, in the next section, I describe another important ritual, Situational Workshops, through which members received feedback but where the set-up and emphasis of the feedback were different than in the 10X program.

**Situational Workshops: Feedback in a “Coaching” Ritual**

Situational Workshop was another decade-old ritual at Next Jump for giving and receiving feedback in a context that was not explicitly geared as a performance evaluation. Once or twice each month, most Next Jump members brought forth a couple of “situations” that they were struggling with and on which they wanted feedback from more experienced members or leaders. Similar to the 10X, this was not a one-on-one, closed-door meeting. Next Jump members attended with their Training Partner (TP) and were joined by two other members, typically another TP dyad (see figure 3 below for a representation of the design and set-up of this program). Those giving feedback also gave it jointly as a “training partner” unit.
“Training partners” referred to a foundational program at Next Jump in which most members – including the co-CEOs and senior members – were paired up with a peer. Senior members began this program with the goal that everyone in the company had someone with whom they felt safe and comfortable enough to share their struggles, doubts, and emotions.

As Charlie Kim shared, explaining the rationale for why the TP program was needed:

> When we go to work, we all have problems in our heads, toxins. Maybe you didn’t get sleep; maybe you have a personal issue at home. But you are supposed to take all this, bottle it up and go sit in a meeting and just be on fire. And then to the next meeting and be on fire. You cannot operate this way.

Training partners\(^{10}\) typically met every day, and no topic was meant to be out of bounds in this “smallest circle of safety.” The idea was to openly share whatever people were bringing with them – mentally and emotionally – into the workplace that day. As I will describe in later chapters, the training partner relationship emerged as a salient aspect of the support and growth that several members shared was a significant aspect of their experience of Next Jump’s feedback culture.

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\(^{10}\) New hires were typically assigned a “Training Partner” when they joined the company – a fellow member of the newly joining cohort, or another recent hire. I found that, in general, members had flexibility and independence in switching training partners. At junior levels in the company, “dating” was encouraged so that members could find the most productive “training partner.” But as members gained experience and seniority in the company, the pairings seemed to become more intentional and strategic, involving greater inputs from the senior members.
In a typical Situational Workshop meeting that lasted one hour, each of the four members receiving feedback – in sequence – presented to the training partners giving feedback, some problem situation or dilemma. After the participants had presented their situation, they actively listened to the feedback, often nodding silently, and taking verbatim notes. Whenever anyone presented his or her “situation,” the remaining three members who were witnessing the interaction remained silent as their co-worker got feedback. In contrast to the 10X feedback program, during the Situational Workshop the “feedback app” was not used, perhaps for two reasons. One, with a group size of six members, it would be challenging to maintain anonymity for the feedback-givers. Two, in contrast to the 10X program that had an evaluative component, the Situational Workshop had the qualities associated with developmental coaching. A second key difference between the two programs – 10X and Situational Workshop – was that, in contrast to Leadership 10X in which only the senior leadership members gave in-person feedback, those giving feedback during Situational
Workshops also included, at times, few select members whom the senior members had identified as being ready for greater leadership responsibilities.

Next Jump members, on their part, seemed to use Situational Workshops to voice concerns and questions on a range of issues. For example, one member shared his worry that his manager did not trust him to produce good quality work and was not giving him as many responsibilities as some of his peers. A common concern amongst some other members was how to mentor new hires and delegate responsibilities while maintaining “quality control” of their work-products. One member shared her struggle with navigating a conversation with a subordinate who was frequently missing deadlines, whereas another person sought feedback on how to communicate with a team member who did not seem to be taking on a fair share of her responsibility in a team project. Further, most people shared their situations with a fair amount of concrete detail; for example, they typically named the people involved, shared specifics of the events as they had taken place, and strikingly, tended to talk about their role or contribution to their challenging situation.

Most of the issues which members presented in these meetings were the small, daily dilemmas that tend to be common occurrences in most workplaces but might go unvoiced in organizations because sharing these issues could feel vulnerable and involved revealing one’s weaknesses, inadequacies, or mistakes. Senior members believed that participating in Situational Workshops honed people’s “muscle” for sharing potentially embarrassing issues and strengthened their ability to take responsibility for the problematic situations in which they found themselves. With this in mind, the meetings were designed such that, with rare exceptions, no one participated in a Situational Workshop with their direct manager, and the company tried hard to ensure that those giving feedback were, at least, one level removed from those presenting the situations. Senior members believed that structuring the program
in this manner had two advantages. First, it would encourage members to be forthright in
the kinds of situations they brought forth for feedback. Second, those giving feedback could
weigh in on the situation with objectivity and distance since they were not, usually, directly
implicated in the challenges that the presenters were discussing.

I found that those giving feedback during Situational Workshops were navigating a
delicate balance – giving tactically useful comments that presenters could immediately use to
navigate their problem situation, while also helping presenters see that their framing or
approach to the situations was part of the problem. Thus, often large parts of the feedback
offered during Situational Workshops included concrete ideas or suggestions about how the
presenter could act or think differently. For example, an engineer brought up the difficulty
he was facing in “giving up” control of a project and getting work done through newly hired
engineers. The senior engineer who was facilitating the session had been in several similar
situations in his early days in the company. His feedback included concrete ideas for how the
presenter could both mentor the young engineer but also keep a closer eye on the quality, for
example, by “coding side-by-side” or by making sure that the newly hired engineer had a
“sandbox” project where he could make mistakes with fewer enterprise-wide consequences.
In a similar vein, a young engineer who was struggling with giving in-person critical feedback
was told that she should first “practice” giving such comments in “less extreme” situations
and with people who were more likely to take it constructively. Overall, I found that
feedback that was given by those who were either relatively new to facilitating Situational
Workshops or were not senior members tended to be more solution-oriented and include
with specific action-points for the feedback-receiver.

My findings suggest that in contrast, when the company’s senior members facilitated
Situational Workshops, even when they offered a solution, they 1) usually contextualized it
within the company’s core values and beliefs and/or 2) offered it to train their colleague’s “judgment and decision-making.” For example, in response to a young employee’s situation about what to do when “I don’t have the answers” that he felt his team expected from him, a senior leader said the following:

When the solution is not clear, as the coach or the person leading the team you can really influence by defining the problem well, helping the team go deeper into the problem and help get everyone on the same page about the nature of the problem. The solution itself than might come from a variety of sources. Versus thinking that as the person leading the team you always have to come up with the solution yourself, shielding the team from the messiness of unpacking the problem and its assumptions.

Here, the senior member did not directly address the younger colleague’s dilemma nor gave him tactical advice about how to navigate his specific situation. Instead, he took a few, proverbial, steps back, and focused the feedback comment on how the feedback-receiver should approach the situation more broadly. In another instance, a senior member – who was giving feedback to a young engineer’s dilemma of how to give critical feedback to her close associates (at work and home) – used his comment to reinforce the core company value of speaking-up: He shared, “I don’t know if this happens to you, but it has happened to me. If you let something bother you and it just builds up, eventually you are going to explode and then it is going to be worse, it will be some big outburst.”

Senior members, when giving feedback, also typically highlighted how the presenters’ ways of constructing the problems and approaching the solutions were flawed and potentially contributing to the problem. For example, one member shared that when he was on leave, he had found that his team did not take the initiative that he had expected from them during his absence. In the same breath, he also spoke about how his “brand” within the company as a “black box” had potentially contributed to this challenge. He went on to share his approach to addressing the issue: changing the daily rituals within his team in order
to “expose my thinking.” In response, the senior member giving feedback remarked that the presenter’s reliance on “rituals” to address this challenge was likely misdirected and was perhaps contributing to less transparency in his team:

I feel you are doing what I have done that doesn’t work. You are applying a very logical process that works if the underlying foundation of trust and team is there. Rituals act as accelerators. But without no-LHF and trust, they don’t work. For example, the fact that you feel as you do, do they know how you were feeling? [The member says no.] All this LHF is not good. If it’s a strong team, you should not be holding so much back.

The senior member’s feedback was inviting the presenter to explore the possibility that his go-to action in this case – changing meeting rituals to make his thinking more transparent, rather than share with his team how he felt – may have been yet another manifestation of an unproductive way of thinking and acting that was potentially showing up in other situations as well. In addition, the feedback comment also included lessons for the receiver on core organizational concepts such as “rituals” and “lying, hiding, faking.” Senior members viewed this kind of feedback – which helped individuals see “repeated patterns” in their behaviors and “make sense of it” – to be consistent with the definition of “coaching,” and thus considered Situational Workshops, fundamentally, as a coaching ritual.

Situational Workshops had begun over a decade back as a scalable model for coaching in the company. Thus, it was not designed to solely benefit those receiving feedback. An equally important goal was to give the feedback-givers necessary practice in giving ‘good’ quality feedback. Differences in the approach or ‘quality’ of feedback were explained in the company by the mantra that “we will make mistakes, but by having to teach, it makes us learn better.” Kim explained the dual-approach as, “being both student and teacher accelerates learning on almost everything.” That is, the Situational Workshop was designed so that those giving feedback would learn in the role of “students” when they
attended Situational Workshops as feedback-receivers and would transfer that learning when they had to facilitate their own Situational Workshop sessions in the “teaching” role. This “teaching” lens had parallels with the 10X program where the company positioned the senior members giving face-to-face feedback as “role-modeling” the qualities of ‘good’ feedback. In later chapters, I will explore some of the challenges that senior leadership members shared they had to navigate in this dual role.

The absence of the “feedback app” and a smaller group size of six afforded those giving and receiving feedback in a Situational Workshop more privacy and far less public exposure than in 10X program. The feedback received by individuals was not visible to the entire company. Similarly, those giving feedback could offer their comments relatively reassured that their feedback was not being heard by a large number of members. This less public nature of the interaction combined with the coaching context in which the feedback was offered, perhaps explains, in part, why, in contrast to the 10X program, Situational Workshop sessions occasionally involved back and forth between those giving and receiving feedback. I witnessed a handful of sessions when there was a brief dialogue between the feedback giver and receiver. For example, the feedback-giver asked the receiver a follow-up or clarifying question, related to the challenging situation that was presented, and the feedback-receiver usually gave a short, brief answer. Alternatively, at times, the presenters asked those giving feedback to clarify their comment or posed their own follow-up question. I found that this kind of participation by feedback-receivers typically occurred in sessions when the leaders facilitating them asked more open-ended questions, invited the feedback-receivers to offer more details about their situation, or allowed for silence and pauses.

To summarize, Situational Workshop was a decade-old ritual which offered many Next Jump members monthly opportunities to receive feedback from the company’s senior
and emerging leaders, on challenging situations. However, in contrast to the 10X, the feedback during these meetings typically had the texture of developmental coaching. This was facilitated by the absence of the “feedback app” and a smaller group size of six which made these meetings less public than the 10X program. Those giving feedback had to strike a balance between offering feedback that was tactical and solution-oriented, and that which supported the receivers in building their self-awareness about the personal growth areas. Similar to the 10X program, Situational Workshops were yet another forum for members to practice and improve their feedback-giving skills.

Discussion

The senior leadership’s approach to critical feedback was based on two fundamental beliefs. One, that individuals could not improve or develop if they engaged in “lying, hiding, faking” behaviors. Two, that everyday interactions in the workplace – of which feedback was one particular kind – were generally characterized by self-censoring, impression management, and a desire to protect the self from feeling vulnerable. These assumptions have support from a strand of organizational learning research which suggests that interactions in many workplaces are marked by interpersonal diplomacy in which organizational members suppress difficult feelings, avoid expressions of vulnerability, withhold information, and act from certainty in order to avoid any possibility of feeling embarrassed or undermined (Argyris & Schon, 1978). Moreover, research suggests that in many workplaces employees withhold themselves from “speaking up” with challenging thoughts because they are anxious about the repercussions on their status and workplace relationships (Morrison, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).
Next Jump’s leadership’s strong view against popular models of feedback interactions, such as the “praise sandwich,” has mixed support in the literature. The detractors of this way of offering feedback see it as a form of manipulating the feedback-receivers and being dishonest about the true intentions of the interaction (Schwarz, 2013). They also point to the ineffectiveness of this approach in conveying useful feedback since feedback-receivers can leave the interaction confused about the key lessons or takeaways.

On the other hand is the argument that negative feedback tends to be experienced as a form of social threat in many workplaces, triggering instinctual anxiety for the feedback-receivers; interlacing genuine positive feedback with the criticism can increase the chance of its receptivity (Porath, 2016; Rock, Jones, & Weller, 2018; Stone & Heen, 2014). In the next chapter, I will describe in more depth the texture of the feedback comments at Next Jump, including how members expressed candor and empathy in their comments. In later chapters, I will also describe the company’s approach to addressing the anxiety triggered by receiving critical feedback by offering feedback-receivers the opportunities for reflection, and a web of trusting relationships that served as safety nets for members.

The ritualization of feedback interactions through the suite of 10X programs – “leadership,” “engineering,” “sales,” “product,” and “revenue” – and the Situational Workshops were important steps in the organization’s efforts to foster a culture that could help members grow beyond their personal limitations. These programs could also be seen as a novel response to the well-documented finding that employees tend to hesitate from directly asking their managers or co-workers for feedback because such direct “inquiry” involves “effort costs” (Ashford & Cummings, 1983, p. 388) in finding the feedback-giver, getting their attention, framing the issue and finding mutual time for the interaction to take place (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016). At Next
Jump, these logistical tasks associated with seeking feedback were managed at the organizational level, thereby potentially lowering some of the barriers to seeking feedback.

At the same time, many aspects of these two feedback programs – the flow of feedback from many members to one receiver, the sequential turn-taking nature of the interaction, and the combination of anonymous and in-person feedback in the 10X – challenged widely-held notions about how feedback takes place in the workplace. Perhaps, even more surprising than the distinct set-up of these programs, was the extent to which the feedback comments – most vividly so in a Leadership 10X – focused on the feedback-receiver’s personal attributes. As noted in the previous chapter, conventional wisdom suggests that feedback is constructive when it is focused on the task at hand rather than on the individual receiving it (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Smither & Walker, 2004) because task-focused feedback helps receivers to act on the comments. This disjuncture between Next Jump practice and research raises questions about how Next Jump members experienced and made sense of the expectations on them to give and receive such personal feedback. I will explore these tensions and questions in more detail in the upcoming chapters. In the next chapter, I describe the distinct set-up of feedback interactions, the nature of the feedback comments, and what actions feedback-receivers took after the comments had been delivered.
Chapter 4: Moves and Responses: Unpacking Feedback Giver and Receiver Actions

Two features of the feedback interactions at Next Jump – as seen in the 10X program and Situational Workshops – stood out to me in my explorations. First, feedback-givers and feedback-receivers, for the most part, were not simultaneously active (and talking) during the feedback interaction. As seen in the descriptions of the 10X and Situational Workshop programs in the previous chapter, those receiving feedback first presented on a topic and then feedback-givers shared their comments. When feedback-receivers presented, those giving feedback wrote detailed notes – often verbatim – and referred to these notes when offering their comments. Barring the occasional and typically brief interjections by presenters in a Situational Workshop, those receiving feedback wrote down the comments they received in-person from the feedback-givers.11 My explorations suggest that this sequential turn-taking during the interaction was a deliberate design element of the feedback programs. A second striking feature of the feedback interactions was that feedback which was offered during Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops tended to flow from many to one. During Situational Workshops, the receiver left with feedback from two senior members. At the end of the typical 10X, presenters got anywhere from 25 to, at times, more than 80 comments. Moreover, in the case of the 10X, the majority of the comments were given anonymously via the “feedback app,” and hence, those receiving feedback typically did not know the identity of most of the individuals who gave them comments.

These two novel aspects of the feedback interactions raised several questions from the perspectives of the feedback-giver and the receiver, which I explored and now address in this chapter. In the role of the feedback-giver, what kinds of feedback did Next Jump

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11 I did not observe a single 10X program in which feedback-givers – including senior most members of the company or new hires – interrupted the presenters during their presentation, and neither did any presenter interject when the senior leaders gave their comments.
members give? Second, did the content of the feedback vary based on the mode (in-person or anonymous) and the context (Leadership 10X or Situational Workshop) in which the comments were given? If so, how? From the vantage point of the feedback-receiver, two key questions were raised. First, what did feedback-receivers do with the feedback comments they received? Second, did the response of the feedback-receivers vary depending on the mode or the context of delivery?

In order to consider the content of feedback, I present my findings in terms of what the feedback-givers actually said, and what verbal “moves” they made. I define a “move” as the types of actions and words used by an individual that constitute an interaction. In this study I found feedback-givers relying on five different kinds of “moves” when giving their comments. Further, I found that the content of the feedback varied depending on whether the comments were delivered in-person or anonymously (mode) and, based on whether they were offered during a Leadership 10X session or Situational Workshop (context).

In looking at the feedback-receiver’s perspective, I found that they typically responded after the feedback interaction was over and did so in three stages. Further, my findings suggest feedback receivers gave a distinct weight and consideration to comments that were delivered in-person versus that which were offered anonymously. Below, I first describe the feedback-giver’s perspective and the kinds of feedback provided. Subsequently, I describe the perspective of those receiving feedback in terms of how he or she responded to the comments.
Unpacking Feedback Content: Feedback-Giver Perspectives

The feedback comments that members provided during Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops were not the typical evaluation of someone’s performance, an after-action review of a process, or ideas about how to improve the design of a product. To gain a deeper understanding of the content of the feedback, I began by defining the “moves” that feedback-givers relied on in their comments. Moves contain and express the “practical knowledge” (Levinson, 1983) of the speakers. The notion of “move” is in line with Goffman’s (1981) proposal that it could serve as a “unit of analysis in situated face-to-face interaction… and could account for the complexities and the regularities observed in the everyday talk” (Pentland, 1992, p. 530).

My analysis revealed a total of five interaction moves – affirming, diagnosing, questioning authenticity, conveying concepts, and advising – which feedback-givers used during the interaction (see figure 4 below for a taxonomy of the five moves). I first explain each of these five moves used by feedback-givers, in isolation of each other. I then illustrate how these moves combined in an interaction. Here, I focus on the different patterns of moves that seemed to be more common depending on whether feedback was given in-person or anonymously, and whether it occurred during a Leadership 10X or Situational Workshop context. Specifically, as I describe below, while some of these moves were more heavily used by Next Jump members, depending on the context (Leadership 10X or Situational Workshop), seen together they represented a novel set of possible kinds of feedback moves.
Figure 4: Taxonomy of Moves Used by Feedback-Givers

Feedback-Giver Moves

**Affirming.** Feedback-givers in Leadership 10X (in-person and anonymous givers) used *affirming* to positively recognize aspects of the presenter. During the Leadership 10X, feedback-givers used phrases such as, “this is the most vulnerable I have seen you speak in three years” or “I think you have become more self-aware” to highlight specific personal
attributes of the feedback-receiver that they appreciated. The move was also used to positively acknowledge and remind the receiver of their strengths and capabilities. As an example from the Leadership 10X context, a senior leader offering in-person feedback offered the following affirmation to the presenter:

You have been defined at Next Jump many times as a killer, and I think that no one can take that away. Or you think about how you are… as tough as nails. You are super smart. You are charismatic. We go to a meeting, and you draw all the client attention. You are just way charismatic and smart with your ideas.

Feedback-givers also used this move to empathize with the feedback-receiver’s dilemma or challenging situation, by sharing their personal struggle or similar vulnerability. For example, a member of the senior leadership team started his comment during a Leadership 10X with words that conveyed that he had experienced some of the challenges confronting the presenter: “I relate with you on two levels – as someone who has struggled a lot in opening up myself. And someone who got early responsibility in my career here.” Another senior leader remarked in her feedback: “I also share this weakness of being vulnerable around my trusted group.” Affirming was a way for some feedback providers to show a holistic awareness of the receiver. One senior leader who regularly gave feedback during Leadership 10X stressed that it was important to “be aware of who the whole person is.”

**Diagnosing.** Members in both Situational Workshops and Leadership 10X (in-person and anonymous) used *diagnosing* to communicate their critical reactions and perspectives to the feedback-receiver. In this move, those giving feedback typically highlighted aspects of the feedback-receiver’s mindsets and actions that they saw as being problematic or unproductive. At times feedback-givers also forecasted the negative consequences that were likely to result if the receivers did not modify their way of acting or
thinking. For instance, a Leadership 10X presentation evoked the following comment from the senior leader giving in-person feedback:

So, I think the danger you have in front of you is that as you are the “on it” guy others will rely on you, and you will be so afraid of not meeting expectations, that you become lying, hiding, and faking for protecting yourself.

In this instance, the senior leader identified what he saw as the feedback-receiver’s problematic tendency to be the “on it guy” and have others over-rely on him; he also predicted that left unchecked, this tendency was likely to lead the receiver towards “lying, hiding, faking” behaviors as a way of protecting himself from embarrassment. Feedback-givers also used the diagnosing move to give the receiver possible explanations for why they tended to engage in these unproductive behaviors by identifying the “root causes” – a term commonly used in the organization for the deeper reasons underlying a given situation or challenge. For example, a senior member used this move in his comments during a Leadership 10X to highlight the receiver’s unproductive trait, possible underlying “root cause” of this trait, and the likely negative consequence of continuing to engage in the said behaviors:

Where I see things sort of break down is that… like you are not really curious about what the other person is feeling or thinking. I think… that is sort of more, to me, the root cause of why you kind of hammer down your own idea.

Sometimes the act of diagnosing was more straightforward. Feedback-givers used the move to share their critical perspectives on the presentation by highlighting elements they saw as entirely missing from the presentation or were inadequately addressed. For instance, one feedback-giver anonymously remarked during a Leadership 10X: “I wanted to see you go into more depth into a lot of areas – feels like you skimmed over a lot of the details, the emotions, the WHY.” At times feedback-givers used the move to convey a gap but did it
indirectly in the form of a question rather than a statement. For instance, a feedback-giver leaving feedback anonymously in Leadership 10X highlighted the receiver’s self-admitted failures with having “training partner relationships” via a question, “why did your TP [training partner] relationship fail? Why has everyone left the team?”

In a Situational Workshop context, feedback-givers typically used this move to share what they perceived to be fallacies or gaps in the way the feedback-receiver was processing the problem-situation he or she had presented. For example, a young engineer who was struggling with what he saw as his failure to lead an office-level initiative received the following comment:

You viewed your role [in that office-wide initiative] as being responsible for the outcome…your focus was overly on something that should have been secondary. The intention of you being a leader is not for the outcome but the process for being a leader. Your focus was on the wrong thing.

In another example from the Situational Workshop context, a senior member used this move to highlight the receiver’s unhelpful tendency to not ask for help, and the likely negative outcome (low rate or lack of personal growth):

I suspect you probably do not like asking for help, just the way you usually act and the way you work on your projects. And so I think without that [asking for help] it will be harder to grow.

Moreover, as seen across all comments, in using this move the feedback-givers typically drew upon several sources – such as impressions and knowledge of the presenter from past interactions, reactions to the current presentation, and their personal life experiences – in making their interpretations and projections.

**Questioning authenticity.** Feedback providers used this move during a Leadership 10X (in-person and anonymous feedback, not during a Situational Workshop) to share their feelings of skepticism about some aspect of the presenter’s intents, actions, or competence.
This part of the feedback was typically framed as, “I am not convinced that...” In a 10X context, this skepticism was most frequently about the feedback-receiver’s commitment to change, as expressed in this typical quote from a senior leadership member: “I am just not believing… it did not give me a lot of confidence… that you are going to do this, this time.” On other occasions, again in the context of the Leadership 10X, the doubt pertained to the feedback-receiver’s plan for improving on his or her growth area: “I am not convinced on your motivation to resolve this as I think in order to do this your practices need to be strong and consistent.”

Overall, this move provided feedback-receivers with a signal about how convincing and authentic they came across to their co-workers during the presentation. Feedback-givers typically framed their skepticism as a “feeling” or a hunch, reflecting the idea espoused by senior members that feedback-givers should act as “human probes” and share their reactions, even if they are not well formed.

**Clarifying concepts.** I found that members who gave feedback in-person in Situational Workshops typically used this move to explain important organizational concepts or principles about topics such as leadership, trust, “lying, hiding, faking,” decision-making, feedback, and mindset. For example, a senior member used the context of the Situational Workshop to explain to the presenter, concepts such as rituals, the importance of trust, and “no LHF” in teams. The senior leader emphasized that the receiver’s strategy of “applying a very logical process” to daily rituals was flawed, without an “underlying foundation of trust and team.” In a different instance, another member used this move when responding to a junior colleague’s statement that she was working on a new set of personal characteristics to improve and had moved on from an earlier version of her “backhand.” “Backhand” is a common Next Jump term that usually indicated the individual’s shortcomings or limitations
that needed improving. In his feedback, the member remarked “I have been so struck personally over the years… the level of depth of chipping away at your backhand.” He was clarifying for his junior colleague, the foundational Next Jump concept of the “backhand,” and the idea that as one’s role changes, “what feels vulnerable will shift and the same backhand is likely to emerge in a different form.” My findings suggest that this move, thus, allowed feedback-givers the opportunity to explain and clarify important Next Jump terms, vocabulary, and concepts. Further, in and of itself, the move did not comment on the presenter, making it the only de-personalized move used by the feedback-givers.

**Advising.** Advising allowed those giving feedback in Leadership 10X (in-person and anonymous) and Situational Workshops, to offer guidance about how the presenters could improve in their perspectives, actions, and mindsets with the goal of addressing the limitations highlighted in the feedback comment. For example, a senior leader giving in-person feedback during the Leadership 10X program offered the presenter with the following recommendation as an antidote to the tendency to over-rely on his point of view:

> I feel like you could try to sign up for a bigger mission than you yourself. So that you actually cannot find out a good solution…that you’re satisfied [with]. Maybe that is when you will figure out, okay I need others’ suggestions. I need to be open-minded in order to solve that big problem.

Members who offered feedback anonymously also used this move to provide the receiver their suggestions for next steps, employing brief phrases such as, “be open to sharing and go into the swamp” or “what I would suggest is a mindset shift for you.” Further, I found that the diagnosing move occurred as statements as well as questions. That is, feedback-givers who offered anonymous comments during Leadership 10X sometimes used this move to offer suggestions that were framed as questions rather than a direct prescription, as seen in this
example: “How do you make it so that it is not all willpower but part of some daily routine or has a deeper reason behind it? Maybe the immunity to change exercise will help here?”

This move was a staple in Situational Workshops, probably because feedback in these meetings was typically offered with a coaching orientation and targeted a problem or dilemma that was salient to the receiver. Thus, feedback-givers relied on the advising move to give the feedback-receivers ideas and expanded options for how to approach the “situation” they had brought forward. This can be seen in the comment: “it is important not to get too hung up on focusing on just one thing because the reality is that … having an experience across different [software] languages will just make you more well-rounded.” In another example, a senior leader suggested that the presenter should have (for a situation that had occurred in the past) “asked more questions” and approached the interaction with a colleague as a “coach” rather than offering that person tactical responses (see Appendix C for additional evidence for these moves depending on mode and context in which feedback was delivered).

In summary, analysis of the content of the feedback given in-person and anonymously during Leadership 10X and offered in-person during Situational Workshops revealed that the feedback-givers generally relied on five moves – affirming, diagnosing, questioning authenticity, clarifying concepts, and advising – to offer their comments to the receivers. Moreover, I found that affirming was used by feedback-givers to convey positive acknowledgment that could be empathy, appreciation, or recognition of the receiver’s strengths. Diagnosing and questioning authenticity moves were typically used by feedback-givers to convey their critical reactions and perspectives. Clarifying concepts gave feedback-givers the opportunity to teach the feedback-receivers and expand their understanding of how the company’s senior leadership members viewed values and concepts related to leadership,
teams, and learning. Finally, through the *advising* move, feedback-givers offered receivers guidelines and suggestions for how they could think or act differently to improve on the limitations or shortcomings as evidenced from their presentations or make progress on the challenges they were facing.

**Patterns of Feedback-Giver Moves**

My data revealed that feedback-givers seemed to rely on distinct sets of moves depending on whether they were giving feedback during a Leadership 10X or Situational Workshop. For instance, I found that three of the five moves – *affirming*, *diagnosing*, and *advising* – occurred in feedback comments irrespective of mode (in-person and anonymous) and context (Situational Workshop and Leadership 10X) of delivery. However, the move, *clarifying concepts*, was typically found in comments given during Situational Workshops but not in Leadership 10X, whereas the *questioning authenticity* move was typically unique to the Leadership 10X (in-person and anonymous). I also found that the overall tone of the comments (across mode and context) was influenced by the presence/omission of certain moves. This led to salient differences in the tone of the feedback which was given in Leadership 10X and Situational Workshop, and differences in tone between comments left in-person and anonymously during the Leadership 10X. Finally, my data revealed overlaps in attributes of the feedback-receiver that were recognized via the *affirming* move, and the attributes which were highlighted as a shortcoming and needing improvement (that is, criticized) through the *diagnosing* and *questioning authenticity* moves. I elaborate these patterns in more detail further below. See figure 5 for the patterns of moves used by feedback-givers depending on mode and context.
Pattern of moves found in Situational Workshops. My data revealed that those giving feedback during Situational Workshops consistently relied on two moves – clarifying concepts and advising. This pattern was resonant with the nature of Situational Workshops which were meetings where Next Jump members solicited comments on a problem “situation” – some aspect of their work-life, decision, or interaction – which they presented to the feedback-givers. Senior members considered Situational Workshops as coaching contexts; the use of clarifying concepts and advising moves was in line with the intent that feedback-givers would help the receivers gain different perspectives on the problems they were facing and offer them expanded options for what they could do to address the “situation.” Given that feedback-givers relied so heavily on clarifying concepts and advising, these
might be considered to be anchor moves, which were then complemented by two other moves – *affirming* and *diagnosing* – that were used more occasionally.

Sometimes feedback-givers used the *affirming* moves with a specific goal of conveying their empathy for the feedback-receivers who presented challenging situations. Feedback-givers did this by exposing their own vulnerabilities, similar doubts, and struggles. Such use of the *affirming* move is aligned with a frequent refrain by senior members: “we build programs so that people do not feel alone… when others share their vulnerability, people won’t feel alone.” Thus, the *affirming* move gave feedback-givers a chance to downplay feelings of embarrassment and anxiety that junior colleagues might feel from their shortcomings being exposed via the situations they presented. Further, acts of empathy by leaders giving feedback in Situational Workshops could also potentially challenge implicit assumptions that feedback-receivers might have about being the only ones to struggle with a particular problem “situation.”

In addition, sometimes, feedback-givers also used the *diagnosing* move to highlight the connections they saw between the receiver’s personal characteristics or tendencies and the challenges they were confronting. For example, a member shared his critical perspectives with a junior colleague on what he saw as the feedback-receiver’s tendencies to “not ask for help” and avoid difficult conversations, which the feedback-giver thought, were partly responsible for her challenging situation. The occasional use of this move during Situational Workshops was in line with the senior leadership team’s belief that these feedback programs should ultimately enhance the receiver’s self-awareness and quality of effort and practices undertaken for self-improvement.

The overall patterns of moves used by feedback-givers seemed to affect the tone of the comments. As noted earlier, *clarifying concepts* are generally de-personalized; they are not
typically targeted at personal attributes of the feedback-receivers. The advising move, in turn, was geared towards offering suggestions and next steps. Both of these moves were heavily used by the feedback-givers, occasionally integrated with the diagnosing move. I found that this pattern of moves imbued the feedback comments in Situational Workshops, in general, with a problem-solving tone. As I explore next, this is in sharp contrast to the feedback given during Leadership 10X.

**Pattern of moves found in Leadership 10X.** In contrast to feedback given during Situational Workshops, I found that the content of feedback given during Leadership 10X (in-person and anonymously) was characterized by a different set of moves – affirming, diagnosing, and advising. Feedback-givers most consistently used these three moves in response to the presentation feedback-receivers made on the “personal impediments” (e.g., lack of transparency or struggle with an expression of vulnerability) they were working to improve and the steps they were taking to make the changes in themselves. Below, I describe the ways these moves were used in the Leadership 10X and highlight salient differences in how these moves were utilized in in-person versus anonymous comments.

*Affirming* when used during Leadership 10X, gave the feedback-givers a chance to positively recognize what the feedback-receivers were doing “right” as evidenced in their presentation (e.g., “good show of vulnerability,” “you are clearly working on yourself”). Positive recognition took the form of feedback-givers sharing that they too struggled with the “impediments” that the feedback-receiver had shared (empathy) or reminding the receiver of their strengths and “potential.” As noted earlier, this move, in general, occurred during in-person and anonymous comments. But my analysis suggests that, on the whole, feedback-givers who used the “feedback app” to offer anonymous comments used the affirming move more than the senior members giving in-person comments. Moreover, the
affirming move tended to be lengthy rather than brief when they occurred in the anonymous comments.

The *diagnosing* move was consistently and heavily used in feedback comments offered during the Leadership 10X (in-person and anonymously) to convey the crux of the feedback-giver’s critical perspectives. This move generally constituted the majority of the feedback comments in Leadership 10X, and senior members typically relied on multiple instances of this move when giving their feedback. This pattern of occurrence of the *diagnosis* move during Leadership 10X was consistent with the goal and intent of the program as a forum for receivers to get “improvement-oriented” feedback on the quality of their “self-awareness” (i.e., how well they understood their personal shortcomings) and on their strategies for “action” (i.e., how well they were working to address these limitations).

Feedback-givers commonly used the move to share with the receivers what seemed to be missing from their presentation (e.g., “I was honestly expecting more… your descriptions of practices seemed surface level.”) Importantly, when senior members used this move, in addition to identifying gaps, they directly named the aspects of the receiver’s mindsets or behaviors they considered to be unproductive. In addition, senior members typically offered the presenters with their interpretations of what might be coming in the way of the feedback-receiver’s attempts to change and learn. For example, a senior leader identified that the receiver’s presentation “did not have a lot of depth,” and guessed (correctly) that the presenter had not vetted the presentation with his training partner. The senior member used this information to hypothesize that the underlying cause was the presenter’s fundamental discomfort with engaging in “uncomfortable situations.”

Feedback-givers (in-person and anonymous) consistently used the *advising* move during Leadership 10X to offer the presenter with ideas and suggestions for how they could
make progress on the areas which required improvement. This finding was consistent with the emphasis that was given in Leadership 10X programs on evaluating the quality of the strategies which feedback-receivers were using to improve and change. The advising move typically came at the end of the feedback comments. Moreover, the suggestions were typically framed as the opposite of the characteristics, or issues that were highlighted through the diagnosing move. For instance, a senior leader had used the advising move to illustrate what he saw as the receiver’s lack of curiosity for the perspectives of others, offering it as a “root cause” that was holding the receiver back from growing. At the end of the comment, the senior leader used the advising move to offer ideas about how the presenter could show more curiosity in his interactions with colleagues:

Just be more situationally aware… understanding what others are thinking of… simple practices like in meetings [practice] saying, ‘ok I want to talk about some things but let me go around the room and let me hear what is on the mind of everyone else.’

In addition to these three dominant moves – affirming, diagnosing, advising – feedback-givers sometimes relied on the questioning authenticity move to express their skepticism and doubts about the feedback-receiver’s intents for changing. This move was found in Leadership 10X (in-person and anonymous) and was consistent with the senior leadership’s expectation that feedback-givers should call out attempts by feedback-receivers at impression management or “lying, hiding, faking.”

Finally, similar to the Situational Workshops, the pattern of moves used by the feedback-givers during Leadership 10X affected the overall tone of the comments. The diagnosis move was heavily used, combined at times with questioning authenticity move; affirming and advising moves were also used consistently but tended to be briefer than diagnosis moves. Thus, I found that the tone of feedback comments during Leadership 10X was, in general,
personal, evaluative, and critical. However, the “critical” tenor was more heavily and consistently evident in the in-person comments from senior members, than in the anonymous feedback. This might be explained, in part, by the fact that senior members, with rare exceptions, relied heavily on the *diagnosis* move, and explicitly named the problematic behaviors and mindsets of the receiver. Moreover, in general, comments from senior leadership members tended to have briefer *affirming* moves. In contrast, feedback comments that were given anonymously typically had longer *affirming* moves and briefer, fewer instances of *diagnosing* moves. A second possible explanation for this difference in the “critical” aspect of the in-person and anonymous comments could be that the senior member comments tended to reflect the ‘candor’ that was espoused and emphasized by the co-CEOs as a crucial characteristic of ‘good’ feedback. Such an explanation would be consistent with the fact that only the senior-most leaders in the company were entrusted by the co-CEOs to offer live feedback during Leadership 10X; the operating assumption was that these senior leadership members were best positioned to “role model” for the rest of the company how to give feedback that sequenced “directness” ahead of “care.” According to Kim, at Next Jump, senior members giving feedback in public during a 10X gained the trust and credibility of the company’s employees by how well they “gave the truth.” Members giving feedback via the “feedback app” were predominantly those who were using the 10X to hone their skills in giving the kind of feedback that was offered by senior members. Within this narrative and set of perspectives, the less critical nature of anonymous comments (in comparison to the in-person comments) would likely be attributed to lower skill on the part of those giving anonymous feedback in rising to the level of “directness” and “candor” in the feedback by senior leadership members. This thesis received some support in interviews with junior members who shared their aspiration to give feedback as modeled by the senior leadership.
members. I share these findings in Chapter 5 when I describe how various members – those who typically gave feedback anonymously and senior members tasked with giving in-person feedback – made sense of the expectations on them in the role of feedback-givers.

**Overlaps in attributes of feedback-receiver that were recognized and highlighted for improvement.** My analysis revealed overlaps in those characteristics of feedback-receivers that feedback-givers positively recognized via *affirming* moves and those attributes of the feedback-receiver which were the subject of the feedback-givers’ critical perspectives and reactions (through *diagnosing and questioning authenticity* moves during Leadership 10X). I found that the positive affirmations were typically centered on the feedback-receiver’s, 1) self-awareness (accurately identifying areas for improvement and weaknesses), 2) vulnerability (conveying openness in talking about struggles), and 3) demonstrated self-improvement. The crux of the criticism, on the other hand, tended to be focused on 1) depth of reflections (surface level reflections that might be low on concrete details or lack deeper thinking on the root cause of the problems), 2) intention for seeking feedback (to manage impression versus desire for genuine learning), and 3) quality of practices or plan to improve and grow (poorly ritualized next-steps which rely on feedback-receiver’s “willpower.”)

Juxtaposing these two sets of attributes – those which were positively recognized and those which were highlighted for critique – side by side revealed remarkable similarities. That is, if members got positive acknowledgment for being aware of their limitations or their role in the challenging situation they were facing, they would also receive critical feedback if those giving feedback felt that the presentation was lacking in depth of reflections. Similarly, while feedback-givers consistently appreciated the presenter for showing vulnerability (especially during Leadership 10X presentations), they also ‘called out’ members who they
felt were presenting successes or trying to ‘look good’ rather than share vulnerabilities. And finally, if members received affirmation from their colleagues for showing signs of change and improvement, they could also be at the receiving end of criticisms about the quality of their strategies for change. Thus, in summary, my findings suggest that the feedback-receiver’s depth of self-awareness; transparency and vulnerability; and demonstrated self-improvements were the attributes or capacities that were the focus of the feedback giver’s attention, whether for the positive recognition of as criticism. I illustrate this in Table 1 where I draw upon examples of feedback comments by different members to show how the feedback comments (given in-person or anonymously) emphasized and coalesced around these three attributes.

Table 1. Overlaps in feedback-receiver attributes that are affirmed and highlighted for improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Receiver attributes positively recognized</th>
<th>Receiver attributes highlighted for improvement and change</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness - accurately identifying areas for improvement and weaknesses</td>
<td>Depth of reflections - surface level reflections that might be low on concrete details, or lack deeper thinking on the root cause of the problems</td>
<td>Affirm: “You are right on your awareness. It felt genuine to me and just knowing you that it felt true;” “I thought that was an honest audit of some of the events in the recent months, I thought you did a good job with that.” Critical: “The way you are phrasing your backhand, it is not really to the root… I feel that it is just one of the symptoms versus the root;” “From an awareness point of view, you have not really pinpointed what the thing is that you want to work on.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerability – transparency, Intentions for seeking feedback - manage</td>
<td></td>
<td>Affirm: “Thank you for being very transparent and authentic to sharing your</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

12 The feedback comments used here as examples were not necessarily given by the same individual, nor necessarily directed at the same feedback-receiver. That is, these examples are not drawn from a single feedback-interaction. Moreover, feedback comments varied in whether or not they contained affirmation and criticism related moves. Hence, the examples in Table 1 are not meant to communicate that any given feedback-receiver got both kinds of feedback (affirmation and criticism) at the same time by the same person.
As seen in table 1, feedback-givers commonly recognized presenters for their understanding of where they needed to improve, through a comment such as, “what you shared in terms of being a perfectionist and wanting approval, that resonated with me in terms of what I have actually seen working with you.” On the flip side, feedback-givers were also attuned to when they felt a lack of such awareness in the receiver’s presentation as conveyed in this comment: “I feel like even the way that you're phrasing your backhand, it's not really to the root I feel… I feel like that is just one of the symptoms versus the root [cause].” Similarly, while feedback-givers recognized a presenter for sharing his story during a Leadership 10X with vulnerability (e.g., thank you for being so vulnerable,”) they also highlighted instances when they sensed that the presenter was concealing weaknesses by “saying the right things.” In a similar vein, feedback-givers, on the whole, were attuned to
the quality and success of the strategies the feedback-receivers used to improve upon their weaknesses, especially whether the practices were based on consistent “rituals” or relied on receiver mustering his or her “willpower.” My findings suggest that the focus of the recognition and criticism contained within the feedback comments on 1) the quality of self-awareness, 2) willingness to be vulnerable, and 3) strategy for changing behaviors were not idiosyncratic patterns but reflected important beliefs and norms about feedback espoused by senior members. For instance, self-awareness and vulnerability were aspects of being authentic and not “lying, hiding, faking” – a core company value. In addition, the emphasis on demonstrated growth reflected a view held by senior members that self-awareness was essential but not adequate for changing behaviors; from their perspective, it was crucial to “set up the right environment” so that members did not have to rely solely on “willpower” to change behaviors.

To summarize, my analysis revealed that feedback-givers used distinct subsets of the five overall moves depending on the context in which feedback was offered – Leadership 10X or Situational Workshops. Further, I found that the specific moves that were used and omitted impacted the tone of the feedback comments and this also varied between Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops. Overall, I found that the choice of moves and resulting tone were aligned with the goal and nature of the two programs and were also consistent with the qualities of feedback as espoused by the senior members.

Overall, my data suggests that feedback comments in Situational Workshops were anchored by two moves – clarifying concepts and advising – which contributed to the content of feedback having a problem-solving tone, consistent with the coaching set-up of the Situational Workshops. In contrast, I found that members giving feedback during Leadership 10X relied heavily on three moves – affirming, diagnosing, and advising – which led
to comments that were personal, evaluative, and critical in nature. This was again consistent with the use of Leadership 10X to offer receivers improvement-oriented critical feedback on their self-improvement journey. However, the in-person feedback by senior members was anchored around the diagnosing moves which gave their feedback a more “critical” tone, in comparison to the anonymous comments. Moreover, I found that the personal attributes of the feedback-receiver that were positively recognized and those highlighted as needing improvement and change overlapped. The three attributes/behaviors – self-awareness, vulnerability, and quality of practice – reflected the core values and beliefs in the company.

In the next section, I delve deeper into the feedback-receiver’s vantage point. I unpack how Next Jump members responded to feedback after the interaction was over – in the contexts of Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops – and whether or how the anonymity of comments influenced the manner of processing the feedback comments.

**Responses to Critical Feedback**

My exploration suggests that those receiving feedback in the Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops tended to actively engage with the feedback comments after the feedback interaction was over and the feedback had been delivered. In contrast, during the feedback delivery, receivers tended to be in a receptive mode, taking things in, and often writing notes. I found that, generally, the responses of feedback-receivers after the interaction was over, unfolded in three stages: 1) collaborative reflection which involved processing the feedback (emotions and content), 2) sharing the key takeaways from the comments with the feedback-givers or manager, and 3) taking action based on the feedback. In this section, I focus on the kinds of responses that generally followed after members had
received comments in a Leadership 10X or Situational Workshop (see figure 6 below which illustrates these three stages).

Further, as I describe below, my findings suggest that the responses of feedback-receivers in stages 1 and 2 – collaborative reflection and sharing key takeaways – were to a great extent aligned with the deliberately crafted eight-step guideline that senior members had laid out to be followed by feedback-receivers as part of the “recovery process.” These eight steps were listed in a one-pager\(^\text{13}\) and included the following steps:

1. Talk about it and “vent” with a trusted partner (“burn off” emotion)
2. Sleep on it
3. Print out [feedback] and read again
4. Cross out what doesn’t resonate
5. Highlight patterns
6. Watch Video [of feedback interaction]
7. Discuss with TP (Training Partner)
8. Document Takeaways\(^\text{14}\)

Senior members often shared this one-pager with external audiences when explaining the organization’s “recovery process;” it began with the tag-line: “feedback is often badly

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\(^{13}\) The eight steps detailed in this one-pager for recovering from the feedback were shared during Leadership Academies or other presentations. Members typically learned the core steps involved in the recovery process in the onboarding process and had the opportunity to enact them during this time.

\(^{14}\) In recent times senior members have preferred the term “processing feedback” versus “recovery process.” There is a shift towards using the term “LBR” to denote the eight steps. “LBR” expands to “Bring it to Light, take a Break, Revisit to find the Lessons.” Senior members also shared that they had sought to simplify and streamline the eight-step recovery process in line with the new “LBR” framework. For example, during the first step (bring it to light) members were to “read the feedback in the app (scan for the extremes – the “1s” and “4s” and watch the video of their presentation”; next, members were encouraged to “oscillate: exercise/walk around the block, snack, at most an overnight sleep” to “take a break” from the feedback; finally, member were asked to “revisit” the feedback to “find the lessons” by “printing out [feedback], crossing-out what doesn’t resonate, highlighting patterns, and documenting/sharing key takeaways.” Further members were reminded that “all steps [should be] with a TP.”
delivered, poorly phrased, unfair…hard to hear. But it is up to you to find the gold.” This conveys the perspective of senior members that it was crucial to “invest in the recovery process” so that the feedback-receivers could get the maximum benefit from the feedback comments.

Moreover, I found that the context in which feedback was offered – Leadership 10X or Situational Workshop – seemed to inform the extent to which the feedback-receivers relied on the three stages after the comments were given. For instance, my data suggests that in a Leadership 10X, feedback-receivers relied heavily on the set of actions in stage 1 – collaborative reflection – as they were confronted with processing a typically large volume of anonymous comments (in addition to in-person feedback). On the other hand, stage 2 of sharing key takeaways was relevant and, in general, practiced by feedback-receivers during Leadership 10X as well as Situational Workshops. A second pattern that emerged during my analysis was that the way feedback-receivers processed the content of their feedback during stage 1 (collaborative reflection) differed depending on whether the comment was given in-person or anonymously. Below, I describe the three stages and how the response of feedback-receivers differed depending on the context (Leadership 10X and Situational Workshop) in which the interaction took place.

**Figure 6. Actions Taken by Feedback- Receivers After the Feedback is Delivered**

Typically within 24 hours  |  Typically within 72 hours  |  In coming weeks/months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE 1: COLLABORATIVE REFLECTION</th>
<th>STAGE 2: SHARING TAKEAWAYS</th>
<th>STAGE 3: TAKING ACTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usually with training partner</td>
<td>• Synthesize the main take-aways or insights from the feedback comments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Share feedback</td>
<td>• Share the key take-aways from the feedback, with those who gave in-person feedback and/or with managers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Vent emotions, self-talk</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Apply lessons from the feedback. E.g. incorporate feedback in other presentations made to solicit feedback; adopt some suggestion from the comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Sift through the comments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assess whether comments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“worthwhile or not”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Stage 1: Collaborative Reflection

My data revealed that soon after a Leadership 10X was over, feedback-receivers typically sought out their “training partner,” or another co-worker, and checked-in with them about the session. The check-in involved discussion on the content of the comments as well as the emotions that the feedback-receiver might be feeling upon receiving the comments. The check-in ranged from a few minutes to longer. A junior engineer shared this about her process:

When feedback is given in the app, I will talk with him [training partner]. He will grab me, or I will grab him, and we will sit together and go through each other’s feedback. Do we agree or not? If I get something that I don’t agree with I just let him know and then we have a discussion around it. Is it ok to neglect it, or should I be paying more attention to it?

My data suggests that such discussion about the content of the feedback, the merits and limits of the various comments (in-person and anonymous), and which feedback to pay attention to and which to let go off, was at the core of how feedback-receivers responded in this stage. The set-up described here – feedback-receivers engaging with a peer to process the content of feedback, and at times, their emotions from the interaction – is what I refer to as collaborative reflection.

Some members emphasized that talking about their feedback with someone else helped people lower their feelings of shame and embarrassment. One member framed it in terms of the value of being able to “talk about it… laugh at it… versus having a lot of emotion.” Feedback-receivers echoed this sentiment that their check-ins with training partners were valuable as opportunities to vent and “burn off” emotions. But others pointed out the importance of moving beyond simply sharing negative emotions. “In the past, it

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15 As I described in Chapter 3, almost every member in the company was paired with a peer, his or her “training partner”. In many cases, “training partners” co-led various initiatives in the company.
would just be vent over lunch with whoever that might be, and nothing really happens,” clarified a member who had been in the company for over a decade, adding that, “and it seems like more of a toxic cycle that you kind of feel bad and more negative… you disregard the feedback and don’t really internalize it.” This member signaled the importance of, and difficulty in, reflecting on and processing the content of the feedback comments. Two leaders (who are also training partners) shared their thoughts on why reflection was important, overall, for extracting lessons from the feedback, and how to go about it.

Feedback is not going to be valuable without the reflection… [but] the reflection doesn’t have to be a big one-hour discussion. Set aside time and do the reflection… Just talk about what you think. Now the other person starts to talk about it. Ok. … this is in my mind about that thing. And then you have this conversation about it… Just see it as a debrief on what just happened.

However, as I describe below, for the feedback-receivers in a Leadership 10X, reflecting on in-person comments from senior members and those given anonymously, was not a straightforward process.

Processing in-person versus anonymous comments. My findings revealed that, across the board, feedback-receivers reflected upon and evaluated in-person feedback from senior members differently than anonymous comments given via the “feedback app.” I found that feedback that was given face-to-face was, by and large, given more weight by receivers, and this was influenced by two factors. One, feedback-receivers typically considered senior members as more competent in giving personally insightful feedback. As a senior leader shared, “I value feedback from people [vs. anonymous] a lot. There is trust, experience, authority… in my head, there is a hierarchy of people.” Two, my data suggests that when feedback-receivers felt that the givers knew them well, they tended to give more consideration to that feedback. For instance, Ursula, whose Leadership 10X was described in the previous chapter, remarked that of the three senior leadership members who had given
her in-person feedback, she most valued the comments from the leader whom she had
known the longest and had worked closely in the past. Ursula’s reflection was a widely-held
sentiment amongst members and emphasized the importance that members placed on
getting feedback from people who had observed them over a period of time and had
interacted with them. A junior engineer explained the distinction via the example of
feedback from his coaches which he remarked was easier for him to “digest, think about” as
compared to anonymous feedback:

They [coaches] know me. They know the background and the context of what they
are giving feedback to. Versus in the app, feedback is very dependent on that
particular situation… People leaving feedback on the app are not my coaches.

This member, similar to Ursula, highlighted the limitations of processing feedback from
someone who may have a ‘snapshot’ view of them – at one moment in time – versus those
members who were likely to have a more holistic and well-balanced understanding of where
they needed to improve and the efforts they had put towards that goal. This illustrates the
dynamics feedback-receivers faced in processing the feedback from the app since those
comments were de-identified and anonymous.

My data suggests that, in contrast to in-person comments, feedback from the app
was often likened by the receivers, to a “temperature reading,” a “directional touchpoint,”
and a “public opinion poll.” The distribution of the ratings – how many 1s, 2s, 3s, 4s – and
comments on the “feedback app,” gave the feedback-receivers signals for how their
presentation was perceived by their co-workers, at large. As one member put it, “it [app
feedback] gives me a sense of should I be sharing more, should I be sharing less, how I am articulating what I am trying to get out there, are people picking up on what I am hopeful they are picking up on.” My explorations suggest that members did not typically give
individual anonymous comments the same weight and consideration as they did to the in-
person comments from a senior leader, possibly for two reasons. First, I found that for many feedback-receivers, anonymous feedback did not have the same kind of accuracy that they perceived in the in-person feedback comments. Some members saw the feedback from the app as having more “noise;” members reported that they had to filter and look through the vast volume of anonymous comments in order to identify the truly insightful comments. As one participant put it, “the amount of time that I take to condense that feedback from the coaches is much less when it is in-person versus when it is in the app.” Second, I found that for some members, the inability to engage or interact with the feedback-giver (due to the anonymity) was, at times, frustrating. As one member explained, “I don’t get an opportunity to ask clarifying questions, dig deeper into the comments.” In the next chapter, I will explore in greater detail this aspect of members’ experiences, especially the importance and impact of the credibility of the source of feedback (e.g., expertise and trustworthiness) on how the feedback was received and experienced.

I also found that senior members offered the feedback-receivers detailed, intentionally crafted guidelines for reflecting on the anonymous feedback, anticipating the support members would require to process the large volume of feedback data from the app. One, feedback-receivers were asked to “search for patterns” in anonymous comments, rather than get “caught up” with individual comments which they may or may not agree with. Two, feedback-receivers were encouraged to “highlight patterns” and look for overarching themes in the anonymous comments but “cross out what doesn’t resonate.” The rationale for this guideline could be found in the one-page document with advice for processing feedback; it stated that the “power of anonymous feedback lies in its quantity” and “could reveal collective intellect.” Further, the guideline to excavate patterns in the feedback comments came with the expectation that feedback-receivers would seriously
consider and interrogate the resulting themes, even if they were challenging and difficult to hear. Senior members believed that the absence of feedback-giver’s identifying information would potentially encourage the receivers to evaluate comments on their merit and not summarily dismiss them based on the biases and assumptions they may have about the feedback-giver.

I found that, in general, feedback-receivers irrespective of tenure and seniority in the company, relied on this strategy of identifying patterns to process the large volume of feedback from the app. One member explained: “there have been times when I have got random one-off pieces of feedback [on the app]. Something negative. Even if it annoys me, I ignored it. But if seven people had said that, I would still be annoyed, but I would take it more seriously.” As per the guidelines, feedback-receivers were to “print out” the comments, use a highlighter to identify the comments which rang true to them, and involve their training partner in this process. I found that members followed this process with varying degrees of faithfulness. I found several instances when members spent time going through each comment, debated the merits of comments with their training partner, and worked closely with their training partner or a trusted colleague throughout the process. Other times, members quickly – and individually – scanned the comments right from their cellphone and identified a couple of themes that stood out to them.

Thus, in summary, I found that feedback-receivers typically responded to feedback from Leadership 10X by engaging in the process of “collaborative reflection.” In this stage, feedback-receivers focused on sifting through, reflecting on, and processing the content of the feedback comments. I found that members tended to engage their training partner or another co-worker during this phase, checking-in with them about how they were feeling after the interaction, as well as, soliciting their perspectives or inputs while evaluating which
feedback to pay most attention to and which to let go off. In addition, my analysis revealed that feedback-receivers granted greater credibility and importance to feedback from senior members – versus the anonymous comments – with the view that feedback from senior leadership members reflected a stronger capacity to recognize patterns and raise possibilities and questions that they had not considered before. I also found that feedback-receivers emphasized and heavily weighed feedback when it came from coaches or senior members who personally knew them and had a deeper understanding of them. In the next chapter, I explore in greater detail the member perspectives on receiving feedback from senior members and the interpersonal factors that impacted this experience.

Stage 2: Sharing Key-Takeaways

My analysis revealed that soon after feedback-receivers had sifted through the feedback comments, they usually synthesized their main takeaways into an email. I found that, in general, feedback-receivers relied on two avenues to share these insights after a feedback interaction. First, they sent an email to the feedback-givers with a summary of the key lessons they had gained from the interaction. I found this response common in members who received feedback during Situational Workshops. As my data suggests, feedback-receivers during Situational Workshops did not typically go through the elaborate process of sifting through and reflecting on the comments laid out in stage 1 as the volume of comments they received was far lower and all given in-person. However, they shared a summary of the notes they had taken during the session.

The second avenue that feedback-receivers had for sharing their insights, reactions, and feelings after a feedback interaction was to include them in weekly emails (called internally as “On My Mind” or OMM) that many members at Next Jump shared, typically
with their managers. The practice of sending these emails was an organization-wide ritual. Senior members had designed it to lower the extent of “lying, hiding, faking” in the company. The underlying assumption was that giving everyone regular occasions to proactively share with their manager any uncomfortable issues, concerns, dilemmas, or challenges, would lower the buildup of “eggshells” in interpersonal communications.

Overall, my data suggest that from the perspective of the senior members, encouraging feedback-receivers to document and share key takeaways was an important step in having receivers engage with the comments from the feedback. There was an emphasis on the idea that when feedback-receivers shared their insights, it was also a sign of acknowledgment for the time and effort that the feedback-giver had put in offering the feedback. Moreover, this offered members giving the feedback a chance to correct and clarify their comments for the feedback-receivers, and learn how members at the receiving end perceived their comments.

Stage 3: Taking Action

My analysis suggests that feedback-receivers, in general, tended to use the comments they had received – the insights they had culled from the feedback – to inform their actions in some way. This response was not a part of the organizationally crafted eight-step guidelines for “recovering” from feedback. However, I found the emphasis on action to be an indication of the belief espoused by senior members that self-awareness was essential but not adequate for changing behaviors and forming new habits. As described in chapter 3, senior members considered feedback as a “psychological mirror” that offered receivers crucial information about themselves which they could use to change and improve. One
member shared his perspective on the connection between learning from feedback and action:

Let us say I am trying to learn from a piece of feedback that I received. I understand [it]… internalize [it]. But have I digested it and processed it? Have I implemented it in something else? That will only show up in action.

Thus, my data suggests that taking action based on comments they received, was an unspoken but widely-acknowledged expectation and response on behalf of the feedback-receivers, in both Leadership 10X and Situational Workshops.

Feedback-receivers generally took action on the feedback comments in two main ways. First, my data suggests several occasions when feedback-receivers acted on the comments and changed their behaviors in response to the feedback. For instance, receivers sometimes incorporated feedback on their style of presentation. One member recalled getting feedback that she tended to come across as overly-polished and non-conversational when she presented. So, in her next company-wide presentation she decided to “not overthink it” and presented without her usual level of advance preparation. Another member shared how he was trying to adjust his pace of presentation because of repeated feedback from co-workers that it was often difficult to understand him. I also found instances when members acted on feedback that was related to other areas beyond their presentations. For example, one member shared that he adjusted his communication with the team and sent more frequent updates on a project as a result of feedback from co-workers that he was not transparent enough in his decision making. Another member shared how he started taking a back seat in team updates in response to feedback that he needed to let his “insecure” training partner step up and share his perspectives.

In addition, I found instances of a longer-term strategy that feedback-receivers used to change their behaviors in response to feedback. Members participated in “culture
initiatives” as a “practice ground” for improving and addressing the limitations identified via the feedback. Every member at Next Jump including senior members, led or participated in some initiative in the company on the culture side – called “culture initiatives” – in which the stakes for high-performance were considered lower as compared to their core “revenue” job (a role for which they were recruited). Senior members instituted “culture initiatives” with the intent of offering everyone in the organization a distinct responsibility or project in which the primary goal would be self-improvement rather than high performance. Senior leaders hoped that members would leverage culture initiatives projects to “work on” behaviors and aspects of themselves which needed improvement, rather than being focused on coming across as high-performing, smart, or competent. This was in line with the belief held by senior members that the pressure to perform well, in general, sharpened people’s tendency to conceal weaknesses and mistakes and to instead impress and put up a non-authentic front. Thus, a young engineer shared that she acted on feedback that her voice needed to be heard more prominently, by participating in a team that made regular presentations in front of the company. Another member decided to take a lead role in an office-level effort in response to feedback that he needed to work on his transparency and ownership of decisions.

16 Practice ground was a common term at Next Jump to indicate any activity that could be used as a mechanism for self-improvement, or which members could use to “practice” those skills and capacities which needed improvement. For example, members talked about using company-wide presentation as a “practice ground” for building confidence or taking on leadership role in a project to get better at coaching skills.

17 Culture initiatives included activities such as planning and executing the yearly holiday party, hosting the weekly peer-recognition event, taking charge of the nutrition and wellness efforts in the office. Since Next Jump does not have a typical “Human Resources” department (culture and people related issues are considered everyone’s responsibility) typical HR tasks such as recruitment and onboarding also fell in the realm of possible “culture initiative” projects. The expectation from someone leading the annual holiday brunch was that he or she was less preoccupied with the logistics and quality of the event but used the opportunity to try different behaviors that would stretch him or her outside their comfort zone.
In summary, my exploration of the responses of feedback-receivers suggests that members typically responded to feedback in three ways after the interaction was over. First, they reflected on the feedback comments, often with their training partner, and approached anonymous comments intending to find “patterns” in the feedback comments. As I found, feedback-receivers typically gave comments from senior members and coaches more weight than anonymous comments. Second, members synthesized the comments into key takeaways which they usually either shared with feedback-givers (in the case of Situational Workshops) or alternately with their manager during the weekly emails. Third, members took action based on the comments in one of two ways. At times members incorporated the advice or suggestion in the comment in their next presentation or project. Members also participated in “culture initiatives” as a form of longer-term opportunity to work on their weaknesses or “character imbalances” highlighted in the feedback.

**Discussion**

The findings in this chapter regarding the moves embedded in the feedback-givers’ comments and the patterns of responses to the comments generally align with insights from the feedback literature. This literature points out that the feedback-receivers’ acceptance of feedback is shaped by their perceptions of the credibility of the feedback source, which in turn, is a function of the perceived trust and expertise on the part of the feedback-giver (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). Consistent with these findings from the literature, my explorations suggest that at Next Jump feedback-receivers were more likely to accept or seriously consider the feedback given to them by senior members. Moreover, in line with existing research that feedback-receivers tend to assess the familiarity and expertise of the feedback-givers in relation to the task or topic at hand (Ilgen, Fisher, &
Taylor, 1979), I found that Next Jump members also preferred feedback from their coaches, managers, or senior-peers who had known them for a longer duration. Senior members take the position that the “most powerful feedback … [occurs] when the collective crowd feedback and the senior members’ and coaches’ feedback match.” They emphasize that when feedback receivers do reject feedback from their coaches or senior leaders, “the collective feedback of their peers (the crowd) was often the change agent to acceptance.”

Moreover, a central element in the three-stage response to critical feedback is the opportunity for the feedback-receivers to reflect on the feedback. This emphasis on reflection is consistent with insights from feedback research that reflection is a “particularly useful strategy for organizations to enhance feedback processing in employees upon receiving feedback” (Anseel, Lievens, & Schollaert, 2009, p. 23; Hall, 2002; Seibert, 1999). However, as feedback scholars point out, in most current workplaces “employees take too little time and effort themselves to engage in subsequent reflection” (p. 23).

Taken together, these three phases – collaborative reflection, sharing key takeaways, and taking action – paint a picture of Next Jump members engaging with feedback and using it to change behaviors, in a more active manner than was evident from seeing them only during the feedback interactions. This is significant because seen across the three stages, the responses of Next Jump members to feedback after the interaction was over seemed to disrupt the well-documented propensity of feedback-receivers to challenge, ignore, and disregard negative feedback (Carver, Antoni, & Scheier, 1985; Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Swann & Read, 1981) or to reshape their social network to gain distance from those giving negative feedback (Green, Gino, & Staats, 2017). In the next chapter, I examine these perspectives and experiences of Next Jump members from the vantage point of feedback-receivers.
Finally, feedback research suggests that supervisors tend to “inflate” their ratings to their subordinates and convey a more positive impression in their feedback compared to what they actually believe when they have to give that feedback in face-to-face interaction with the subordinate member (Fisher, 1979). According to the researchers, supervisors engage in such “inflation” to lower the discomfort and anxiety of communicating something unpleasant (e.g., negative feedback). Such “inflation” of feedback in the form of “softening” of the feedback comments due to the anxiety of delivering it in-person, was not evident in the comments that senior members gave during Leadership 10X. This was even as the leaders delivered the feedback in front of co-workers, and with the pressure of serving as a “role model.” The nature of feedback given by senior leadership members at Next Jump can be seen as an example of them “walking the talk” on their espoused beliefs about what constitutes good feedback. In doing so, these senior leaders were also challenging some unspoken norms for giving feedback. In the next chapter, I explore further the challenges that some senior leadership members shared about giving such feedback and the strategies they used to navigate those dilemmas.
Chapter 5: Challenge, Change, Confirmation: Individual Experience of Feedback Culture

In this chapter, I explore the individual Next Jump member’s experiences within the organization’s feedback culture. What was it like for members to frequently receive critical feedback on their personal selves? What did members feel and think when tasked with offering similar feedback to peers with whom they might have a close relationship, coaches whom they looked up to, or for some, giving feedback in the presence of their co-workers? What felt challenging, and what felt valuable and sustaining from the perspective of the individual Next Jump member?

My analysis revealed that, overall, Next Jump members characterized their experiences within this feedback culture as a combination of challenge, change, and confirmation. Members shared feelings of being “on a roller coaster ride,” at times stretched beyond their comfort zones. However, I found that, in the same breath, members traced an arc from these challenges to how they had learned and changed. I found three dimensions along which members most vividly narrated experiences of having improved: 1) approach to giving and receiving feedback, 2) awareness about how they act, think, and feel in different situations, including their personal limitations, and 3) capacity to act in ways that they previously could not. Thus, my exploration suggests that the areas in which members typically felt stretched and uncomfortable were also usually the aspects where they shared stories of improvement. Finally, I found that the experience of confirmation was anchored within the interpersonal bonds of trust with co-workers – training partners, coaches, and senior members. These interpersonal relationships seemed to function as a holding vessel. They contained the anxieties that members experienced when hearing disconfirming feedback or when they had to give someone such feedback; spurred trust in the good
intentions of the feedback-givers; helped members express themselves more fully, including
their shortcomings. Within this climate, giving and receiving critical feedback seemed to be
recast as an expression of concern for and an investment in the member’s learning and
personal growth rather than solely an evaluation. Below I describe each of these three salient
facets – challenge, change, and confirmation – of the individual experience within the
company’s feedback culture. I begin by describing how members reported being challenged
within the company’s feedback culture, and then examine the experiences of change; I
follow this sequence because my findings suggest that for many members their experiences
of significant growth were along the same dimensions which they had initially found
challenging.

Challenges

One unsurprising strand in the experiences of Next Jump members navigating the
feedback culture was that of challenge. My findings suggest that members were challenged
from the perspective of feedback-receivers as well as givers. For those receiving feedback,
processing the critical comments, and demonstration of vulnerability and emotions tended
to be uncomfortable experiences. For those giving feedback, the nature of challenges varied
depending on whether senior members were giving in-person feedback or other members
were giving anonymous or in-person feedback (but not in public setting such as Leadership
10X).

From the Vantage of the Feedback-Receiver

Next Jump members widely echoed the sentiment expressed by a young engineer
that “working on the self is hard… even with the set-up of training partners, situational
workshops, and coaches.” Members admitted that critical feedback often triggered difficult
emotions and self-talk. “Whether you are receiving feedback in the app or in-person,” an engineer remarked, “your emotional-self kicks in first. You are angry, sad, or disappointed and it takes a while for you to come out of that.” He went on to share an instance when a senior leader gave him critical feedback on holding mismanaged priorities; the young engineer vividly the instinctive feeling that “this is not true, this is not fair, I have worked so hard for this company.” Senior leadership members and those with longer tenure in the organization shared that they were also not immune to the effects of hearing hard feedback. One member with a decade-long tenure in the organization recalled a particularly challenging company-wide presentation during which he had received low ratings and critical comments. He explained, “I am used to the 1s [ratings in the app], but that time it really stung me. I couldn’t even look at anyone. That time I took my jacket and walked out of the room.”

While hearing critical feedback was generally hard for several members, my analysis suggests two aspects of being in the role of feedback-receiver that were particularly discomfitting for some members: 1) demonstrating vulnerability and emotions during the presentation, and 2) processing the critical feedback after the interaction was over.

**Demonstrating vulnerability and emotions.** My analysis suggests that for some members the challenge in receiving critical feedback lay in the demonstrations of vulnerability and emotions when presenting in front of the company. A young engineer recalled feeling skeptical during his onboarding phase\(^\text{18}\) (from a few years back) when he had to identify and then share in front of a small group the personal limitations that he would work to improve. He remembered thinking to himself, “I don’t want to share my personal

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\(^{18}\) Newly hired members went through an onboarding process called the “Personal Leadership Bootcamp.” One goal for this program was for newcomers to build self-awareness about the areas in which they needed to improve and start working on them through participation in “culture initiatives.” Every few weeks, they presented their emerging insights about their “self-awareness” and “action” to a few senior leaders in a meeting.
stories. I have kept them to myself for so long, so why I would suddenly start spilling the beans about who I am?” Not surprisingly, members seemed to feel this tension most during Leadership 10X when they presented on which aspects demanded greatest personal improvement. As seen in the previous chapter, feedback-givers acknowledged feedback-receivers when they sensed a willingness to share mistakes, failures, or imperfections. Equally, feedback-receivers were called out if they came across as putting on a polished, self-assured front, that could signal “lying, hiding, faking.” I found that members were attuned to this expectation of vulnerability, especially during Leadership 10X. At the same time, in the perspective of some members (often new engineering hires), it was a novel experience. However, at times, it could also be a discomfiting experience to witness the vulnerability of their co-workers which, one member noted, could occasionally be “over-the-top and exaggerated.”

My analysis also revealed instances when members described their own difficulty in deciding where to draw the line in their presentation or reflections to the company; how much should they share? The following quote from a member with a long tenure in the company reflected this dilemma:

I am against floodlighting. There are parts of my personal life that I would not share in a Leadership 10X but which they [my coaches and training partner] might know… there is sometimes an undercurrent of a feeling that you have to be authentic and that you have to expose everything or too much. And I find that almost irresponsible. You own it [what to share]. Nobody is forcing you.

This member highlighted the tension she saw between over-sharing and not sharing enough. The concept of “floodlighting” was used in the company to indicate instances when someone oversharped personal information in a larger group of people that they didn’t know well – for example during their Leadership 10X presentation – and before they had processed the events or experiences within a smaller group (for example, with their training
partner or a trusted peer or coach). I found that the boundaries of what constituted “floodlighting” and when the presenter had engaged in it (or come close) were not explicitly laid down; instead, it seemed to be a matter of how the audience (or feedback-giver) perceived it. Feedback givers – anonymously or in-person – would let the presenter know through their feedback comments during a Leadership 10X, for example, if they felt that the presenter had indulged in “floodlighting.” For example, a senior member recalled when a colleague had shared a deeply personal challenging aspect of their life during a Leadership 10X, which had come as a shock and surprise even for close colleagues. I found that senior members were attuned to the fact that members – especially new hires or those with shorter tenure in the organization – might equate being authentic with how much vulnerability or emotion they expressed and generally encouraged members to resist this instinct. They echoed the sentiment in the above quote that expressions of vulnerability which happened via “floodlighting” were unhealthy and unhelpful for the presenter. According to Kim “floodlighting” “occurs when a presenter shares unprocessed and undealt with emotion to a large crowd vs. in smaller, safer circles.”

**Processing the comments.** My analysis suggests that processing the feedback was often challenging for members. I found that some Next Jump members struggled with comments which asked them to reflect more deeply on themselves than they wanted to or felt capable of doing. One member explained this struggle as follows:

I gave a Leadership 10X about working on my confidence. I did not go into any background of my childhood that did not feel relevant. It was an academic presentation rather than an emotion-driven presentation. A lot of the feedback on the app was like – you could have dived deeper. I don’t know – maybe I just don’t get it at some level… 10X is the only format in which there is a little pressure or tension of feeling like I potentially have to go deeper than I want to… I will get asked the deeper question of why… But as far as I am aware, this is just something that I know about myself.
This member received several comments – anonymously and in-person – that his presentation was lacking in adequate deep reflection on his “backhands,” the aspects of his mental habits or behaviors which were holding him back. The comment is consistent with findings from Chapter 4 that feedback-givers consistently highlighted their perceptions of the feedback-receiver’s “self-awareness” and “depth of reflections” as evidenced in the presentation. Senior leadership members also emphasized and modeled attending to the “root cause” of a problem or challenge and expressed that they believed that members’ strategies for change would be better targeted at the underlying sources rather than symptoms of the problem. Although a few members felt that receiving feedback was a difficult expectation to navigate, both in terms of skills and emotions that it demanded, others interpreted it as an invitation to do a deeper reflection.

Another challenge of processing feedback came from having to revisit the comments and the emotions associated with that experience. As I described in Chapter 4, right after the interaction was over, members were encouraged to – and typically did – reflect on their comments. Such reflection was a fundamental element of the “recovery process” that senior members had crafted so that members could learn from the feedback interaction. Members widely acknowledged that in the Next Jump environment it was harder for them to simply ignore the uncomfortable, negative emotions triggered by the interaction. Some members, especially those more senior and with longer tenures, evoked the metaphor of the “swamp” to describe what it was like to grapple with the negative emotions and narratives when processing the critical feedback. Senior members commonly used this term to portray – similar to the sludge and debris in a swamp – the morass of emotions such as anger, shame, guilt, or anxiety that resulted from hearing personally critical feedback. I found that senior members emphasized the importance of facing the difficult emotions and narratives that
emerged from processing the feedback head on and choosing to dig deeper and learn from
them rather than avoid the discomfort. A member described what it meant to her to be in
the swamp with her training partner:

Having the nerve to talk about it [feelings and thoughts] and going there, seeing it
with both eyes open, and suffering through it... seeing the ugly truth sucks. It is
almost like knowing where things went wrong and feeling that... pain. Facing it
versus just running away from it saying “No, that did not ever happen. What are you
talking about?”

This member’s quote is illustrative of the view offered by senior members that critical
feedback represented the “ugly truth” and that processing the comments meant not
“running away” from “where things went wrong.” Another member shared her experience
of “being in a swamp” when senior members criticized her for not speaking up with her
views during an important meeting. She recalled feeling a sense of “denial” at first, thinking
to herself: “Oh my god. I don’t think it [the criticism] is fair. I did speak. How can they say I
did not speak?” According to this member, she had to name and confront these feelings and
self-talk and receive help from her training partner before she was able to “see the truth” in
those comments.

To summarize, getting critical feedback was a challenging experience for members
irrespective of how often they had been at the receiving end. It often triggered feelings of
frustrations, anger, or denial which, in the Next Jump context required processing. But
engaging in deeper self-reflection after getting the comments often demanded vulnerability
that some members found challenging. Ahead in this chapter, I describe the experiences of
growth that members shared, on these very dimensions where they had felt challenged.
From the Vantage of Feedback-Givers

I found that the discomfort and challenges members experienced when giving critical feedback varied depending on the individual’s role in the organization. Senior leadership members who provided public, in-person feedback during Leadership 10X sessions shared distinct challenges from other members who typically gave anonymous feedback or offered in-person feedback in private informal conversations or within a smaller team setting. My explorations suggest that senior leadership members typically confronted the difficulty of sharing critical comments on an individual’s “character” in a way that was direct but also conveyed to the receiver that they were coming from a place of ‘good’ intentions. These members also spoke of the challenges in delivering such feedback in a coherent and articulate manner, in front of other co-workers, and in a very short period of time (2-3 minutes). In contrast, I found that for the rest of the members (who were not in the senior leadership team), the challenges in giving critical feedback typically lay in two somewhat distinct areas. The first was to come up with the kind of depth and personal insight in their comments that they saw senior leadership members modeling. The second was to navigate the dynamics and the discomfort inherent in giving face-to-face critical feedback to their junior colleagues. Below, I first describe how senior leadership members described the challenges they faced in balancing directness and care in the feedback given in a public setting. I then offer perspectives of members-at-large about their struggle to offer personally insightful feedback, and of doing so in a face-to-face conversation.

Balancing directness and care in a public setting. Senior leader challenges.

Some senior leadership members admitted that, even with years of practice, giving someone critical feedback on their personal characteristics was harder in a public forum, like Leadership 10X, than in the other contexts in which they often gave feedback. At one level,
pointing out areas for improvement in a person’s character highlighted, for one leader, his own struggles on similar aspects. A senior leader explained this tension:

What happens is, as you are thinking what you are going to tell them, you realize that some or many of these things apply to you as well on some level. You feel empathy, but you also feel … like who am I to be judging these people?

This leader highlighted the feeling of being an imposter for giving people comments on personal attributes which, he explained, he also needed to work on. Senior leadership members also highlighted that giving people critical feedback on technical skills rather than on their character was relatively more straightforward. As one member explained:

Giving feedback on their work is very objective and it is less emotional. I think people are more willing to take the feedback when you are trying to help them improve their skills. But in Leadership 10X they are seriously vulnerable, sharing their personal story about the backhand.

This leader highlighted a key difference, as she saw, between offering her co-worker feedback on his or her technical skills or performance versus the weight of giving comments that “impact someone’s character.” Other senior leadership members echoed this sentiment and emphasized that when giving feedback during Leadership 10X, they had to be especially mindful of the vulnerability that the presenters were possibly feeling and were bringing with them to the session. This highlighted for several of the senior leadership members, the importance – and challenge – of imbuing their comments with directness as well as care and concern so that their comments had a greater chance of being received constructively.

Senior leadership members shared that it was vital for them that the feedback-receivers understood that their critical comments were grounded in their good intentions and a desire to help the receivers grow; the feedback was not intended to “beat them up.” As a senior leader explained, it was crucial for him that feedback-receivers believed that he and others in the team were providing challenging comments to “help advance you to a better
place” and not with the intention to “hurt you, be mean or spiteful, cause shock, further their own teams or careers.” At the same time, they admitted that it was harder to give such feedback when they did not know the person receiving the feedback deeply or could not presume trust in that relationship. In such a scenario, the manner in which they delivered the comment became all the more important. As one leader emphasized,

My goal is having them to see the gold in it [feedback]… language is one aspect. But also, your emotions, your body language everything really matters when you are giving verbal feedback… so that people can feel that you really care about them… that you are [not] just doing it for the sake of doing it [giving feedback].

This leader was echoing the recognition that the manner of providing the comment was shaped by more than the words she or other leaders used. But as my findings suggest, members shared that consistently striking a balance of directness and care in the feedback was not easy. They had to accept that at times their comments would come across harsher than they wanted to; or that the comments were not as crisp and clear as they had intended. A senior leader recognized that if he was “giving feedback in a very very strong way… very brutal way, the presenter is not going to want to listen to it.” However, in the same breath, he admitted that striking such a balance in his delivery had been “very difficult” for him. He recalled leaving a recent Leadership 10X feeling “very bad” that his feedback to the presenter – whom he knew well – had been “harsh” and that he had failed to offer the person adequate “positive reinforcement.”

I found that the public context of Leadership 10X also seemed to make giving critical feedback more challenging for the senior leaders. It exposed any imbalances in their feedback to a larger group of people. As one member remarked, “you are being watched by everyone sitting there… [it] is very stressful.” My findings suggest that there was a feeling amongst some senior leadership members that they had less room for error when giving
feedback in public; even an insightful comment could be misjudged or misconstrued by their co-workers (or outside observers) if they did not deliver the comment well. As a senior leader admitted, “one piece of feedback that is not delivered well… even though that could be very good insight… it is going to hurt.” But getting the delivery right was made more difficult by the fact that they typically had only a few minutes to gather their thoughts to prepare a coherent and articulate comment. A senior leader emphasized that such “judging on the spot is very difficult… to organize all the thoughts and talk in a way that people understand it.” Implicit in these challenges were some of the criteria that leaders had in mind about the quality of feedback they wished to offer: comprehensive, insightful, articulate, direct, and compassionate.

Further, I found that giving feedback in a public setting meant that members of the senior leadership team opened themselves up for getting anonymous feedback from their co-workers on how well (or not) they were giving feedback. That is, members who attended the 10X as part of the audience (giving feedback anonymously through the app) often left feedback for the senior leadership members on the quality of their in-person comments. For example, senior leaders got comments that they were “rambling” and were offered suggestions such as, “pace yourself and be punchy.” Another senior leader recalled receiving criticism that her body language during the Leadership 10X had conveyed the sense that she was distracted. Other members shared times when they were called out for either being too lenient towards the presenter or excessively harsh and had “lacked empathy.” This also highlighted, I found, a tension that senior leadership members had to navigate: seeing themselves in both a teacher and a student role when giving feedback (especially during a

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19 Senior leadership members also frequently received positive feedback on their feedback giving via the feedback app, through comments such as: “incredibly insightful,” “phenomenal,” “thought provoking,” and “well balanced.”
10X). A senior leader remarked that “anything in public is a practice ground.” So, even as they did their best to give a comment that, as one leader put it, is “not too strong not too soft… just right,” they also needed to acknowledge that they were working to improve the quality of their feedback-giving with every occasion.

**Challenges for non-senior members.** My findings suggest that for members-at-large who were not part of the senior leadership team, the challenges in giving critical feedback seemed to be fewer and less intensely felt in contrast to the experience of receiving critical feedback. This was perhaps because a majority of Next Jump members gave most of their feedback anonymously. Further, since only senior leaders gave in-person feedback during Leadership 10X, most members gave their in-person feedback typically in one-on-one conversations with the feedback-receivers, outside of the public glare. However, I found that, for some of these members, giving feedback was challenging in two ways: (1) giving insightful personal feedback in the style of the senior leaders they observed and wanted to model and (2) navigating the dynamics and discomfort of giving in-person critical feedback.

Echoing the first theme, a member explained:

“I do struggle to see it at the layers that some of our more experienced people do… like some of the judges will see three layers deep. What I may be seeing is just one layer. So, I might just comment on the set up rather than the person’s character or personality… I don’t think I could judge a 10X.”

This member highlighted a sentiment several members echoed about the discomfort with probing more deeply and drawing connections between the presentation and the feedback-receiver’s personal limitations. Moreover, the concern with commenting on the “person’s character or personality” aligned with the experience of senior leaders who viewed this to be one of the harder aspects of giving critical feedback, especially during a Leadership 10X.
I found that members who were in positions and roles where they either facilitated Situational Workshops or offered in-person feedback to their team members reported struggling with the dynamics of giving face-to-face feedback to junior colleagues. For example, some members shared feelings of anxiety from either anticipating or experiencing what they perceived to be defensive reactions from the feedback-receivers. One member framed it as the challenge of giving feedback even “when you don’t have that circle of safety built in… where they [feedback-receivers] might become defensive… where they don’t know you.” Members also shared instances when they felt that their colleagues took their feedback “personally” or did not understand that they were giving that feedback for the “larger good of the enterprise.” Such instances, my findings suggest, required members to navigate through uncomfortable conversations. I found that some members, remarkably, felt more comfortable giving in-person feedback upwards – to their coaches, a senior technical mentor, or even their manager – then giving critical feedback downwards. This could be seen as a reflection of the trust and openness that these members had in their relationship with the senior members. As one member explained, “senior people usually are more open-minded. They know at least that the intention [of giving the feedback] is for the sake of the enterprise.” However, there was a sentiment that this trust needed to be “earned” and they could not assume they had the same authority and trust with their colleagues with whom they were working or leading.

To summarize, members narrated experiences of challenges in both receiving and giving critical feedback. Receiving disconfirming feedback tended to be hard because it required members to wrestle with the emotions, narratives, and expressions of vulnerability triggered by hearing critical feedback. In contrast, I found that the challenges in giving critical feedback were salient in somewhat distinct ways depending on whether or not the
feedback-givers were senior-leaders who offered in-person feedback. My inquiry suggests that some senior leaders who offered feedback during a Leadership 10X were attuned to the tension of weaving both directness and care in their comments so that their feedback had a greater chance of being received constructively. This perspective is striking in that it would seem to stand in contrast to the features of ‘good’ quality feedback as espoused by senior members – that is, candid, direct feedback that prioritized candor over empathy. As I elaborate in the final chapter, one way to reconcile these dilemmas and concerns of senior leaders is to consider the ‘face’ concerns (Goffman, 1956) that they might be confronting when tasked with giving public feedback. My findings also suggest that members who were not giving such in-person feedback in a public domain were typically stretched by the discomfort of giving critical feedback in face-to-face interaction, as well as excavating deeper, personal insights as they saw modeled by senior leadership members.

**Change**

With rare exceptions, Next Jump members shared stories of change in the same breath they described being deeply challenged. In my analysis, challenge and change emerged as complementary and interrelated narratives. My explorations suggest three ways in which members experienced a change in mindsets and behaviors: 1) shifts in the manner of receiving feedback, 2) changes in substance and style of giving feedback, and 3) self-awareness and capacity to enact behaviors that were once outside their comfort zones. I found that some members plotted their progress along an arc of change, noticing small steps forward from where they had been along this trajectory. A few felt that they had grown more substantially as individuals and that these changes were visible in their non-work
relationships and contexts as well. Below, I describe these three aspects of member experiences of change.

**Shifts in Manner of Receiving Feedback**

Most members shared substantive shifts in their approach and reactions to receiving critical feedback. In general, participants acknowledged that they had developed greater “resilience,” were “toughened,” and had grown a “thicker skin” in the face of critical feedback. They juxtaposed these attributes with an earlier time when they were “overly sensitive,” “less open,” or “took feedback very personally.” The improvements that members narrated about how they received critical feedback seemed to show up in faster recovery time, fewer instances of visceral disagreements with feedback or the feedback-giver, and greater ownership over how to use the feedback and what to share or withhold when seeking feedback.

At a basic level, several members with a longer tenure in the company shared that while critical feedback still “stings,” over time they had developed a “shorter recovery time” such that the negative emotions and self-talk lasted for a shorter time. As a senior member explained: “It [getting critical feedback] is hard. But you get resilient over time. I have seen it in myself. It would probably stay with me for two weeks or longer. I would be in a foul mood all day. I would have such terrible self-esteem. It was unproductive.” For some members, this capacity to more readily bounce back after hearing challenging feedback was a result of sheer practice – of having to frequently go in front of the company (or in smaller settings such as the Situational Workshops) to solicit and hear critical feedback. As an experienced member shared, “it is like the 10,000 hours thing. You get so many zings that you build a little tough skin.” Thus, over time members seemed able to sort through whether
or not they agreed with the feedback faster and move on from the emotional turbulence of hearing critical feedback. Moreover, I found that inherent in this improved “recovery” time was the view that critical feedback was often hard to receive because the receiver felt a visceral disagreement with the comments.

At the outset, several members shared that they did not typically disagree with the feedback they got, especially when it came from senior leaders. The reasons varied: the discomfort of disagreeing with an “authority,” feeling that it was “not emotionally worth it,” personal tendencies to not broach difficult conversations and “let eggshells build-up,” personal preference to not “counterpoint people, stop them, argue with them,” and the view that settings such as Situational Workshops were not always set up for “two-way” conversations or discussions. In fact, my explorations suggest that several members viewed having fewer instances when they instinctively disagreed with feedback as a sign of positive change in how they received feedback.

Members echoed a belief that feeling driven to challenge, question, or disagree with feedback was likely to be a sign of the receiver’s “defensiveness” and lack of “openness” about hearing a conflicting perspective. A young engineer explained this view:

My tolerance towards feedback has changed. In the beginning, when I received feedback, I would disagree with a lot of it. Even though I would agree and say that yes, yes, I did not internalize it. In the beginning, I used to be like, maybe this is not as true, maybe there is another dimension to this. I used to get defensive. I used to get victim-y. Versus now, I think I am still not very good at it. But I think I have started to realize that the feedback actually reflects on me… I have those [disagreements with feedback] less and less these days.

For this member, his improved “tolerance” in the face of critical feedback came with a recognition that he perhaps had to assume greater responsibility for the situation or topic on which he was given feedback than he had previously thought. In contrast, a senior member shared coming to a place of fewer disagreements with feedback based on her increasing
realization that there might be a “gem or pearl” in the critical feedback that she may have missed. Another member wondered if perhaps he “did not hear [the feedback] correctly,” and therefore wanted to “practice giving the benefit of the doubt [to the feedback-giver].”

Senior members evoked the concept of “ladders of inference” as a tool they tried to use to move beyond reactive disagreements with the feedback. In the organization, they defined this as understanding the underlying assumptions and data points that the feedback-giver was using in forming his or her interpretations and conclusions. Members shared instances when they had engaged the feedback-givers in a conversation about the comments, but had approached it as a way of “thinking with” the feedback-giver to better “understand what they are really trying to say,” so that the feedback-givers understood that they were “not saying I disagree with you… not kind of putting that guard on.” As one member explained, “there is a reason why that perception exists.” Thus, my findings suggest that many members saw their greater resilience in the face of critical feedback to be vividly reflected in the fewer instances when they felt driven to disagree with the feedback comments.

My data reveal that for a handful of members, “resilience” or “openness” to critical comments reflected a qualitatively different stance towards feedback. These members who typically had longer tenures in the company emphasized their capacity to selectively pick what was valuable from the comments and “move on.” The member who had earlier shared being in a “foul mood all day” when she got harsh feedback remembered that back then she “had to reconcile every point [in the feedback]… either all your feedback is right, or all is wrong.” As she elaborated:

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20 While I was unable to definitely track the source or origin of this term, some sources attribute it to the organizational learning theorist Chris Argyris. I also found it more prominently cited in Peter Senge’s book, “The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization.”
In the beginning, I did actually talk back, because I wanted to explain myself. Even in situational workshops I have said ‘you didn’t understand what I was trying to say’… I used to get angry and emotional about it. ‘How dare this person say this. They did not understand the context. They don’t know what they are talking about. I did not have an opportunity to defend myself.’ Now, I have gotten better at throwing out the noise. Because sometimes I really don’t agree with something. But now it is like, if it is not valuable, move on.

This member expressed a newer capacity of being able to, with effort, “move on” from the feedback that did not resonate with her. This stood in contrast to feeling compelled to justify, defend, or, “convince” the feedback-givers why their feedback was wrong. Moreover, her narrative also suggests that she had potentially developed an internal set of criteria against which she evaluated whether the feedback comments were indeed “valuable” or not.

In addition, and resonant with this theme, I found that a couple of members emphasized their increasing “openness” to critical feedback as coming from their newfound ability to see feedback as “data points.” A member with a decade-long tenure at the company shared, “I used to be overly sensitive to feedback from above. [But] at this point, I view every feedback… it is a data point…What they [my coaches] think, and other people think, like, they are all data-points. They have a perspective on it, whether right or wrong, but it is a perspective.”

Thus, member responses suggest two different ways in which they changed over time in how they reacted to the feedback. First, they came to view each comment as a single “data point” and did not, therefore, need to take as much time processing any one piece of feedback. Second, with time, some members came to exercise agency in testing the feedback against a set of personal priorities, values, or goals that they had crafted. My analysis suggests that this rationale for why members mustered a less reactive response to critical feedback seems substantively different from the ability to withstand critical feedback because of
consistent practice, or by relying upon and leveraging supports in place to vent and process the feedback better. Reflections by another member echoes this stance:

Right now, I experience it as… it is up to me what I choose to throw out and keep. Even if they say something that I disagree with, I can choose to disregard it. It is not being shoved down my throat. I do feel that because I am the owner of what I do with the feedback. No one is doing it to me. For example, I could be in a Situational Workshop where someone gives me advice that is terrible. I just throw it out. It is not worth it to engage.

Changes in Substance and Style of Giving Feedback

Members across a range of tenures and seniority in the company also reflected on changes in the substance and style of the feedback they gave. Junior members who typically left feedback via the “feedback app” described a shift in the content of the feedback they gave. Whereas, several members, across tenures in the company, reflected on changes in the style or tone of the feedback they provided.

I found that several members who typically gave feedback anonymously reported a change from their usual way of offering such feedback: enter their immediate thoughts and reactions, or echo back to the receiver what they had heard in the presentation. In contrast, some members described that they were learning to take on the perspective of the feedback-receivers so that the comment could be more “useful” for the receivers. As a young engineer shared, “I have definitely gotten better… one turning point was when I realized that I am not just giving them a review of what they did… if they were doing this tomorrow what would I say to them so they can do it better?”

I found that this notion of helping the receiver to “do it better” emerged as a common concern and shift in the way of giving feedback. Echoing this theme, a member recalled that when he first started using the feedback app, it was “very subjective… everyone [was] just spouting their personal opinions.” He felt that over time, he had adapted his
feedback giving such that his comments were more than a reflection of his opinions. He explained his approach as, “trying to put myself in their shoes more and see it from an enterprise perspective… I have been getting more objective with my feedback.” The idea of becoming more “objective” with the feedback also reflected the efforts on behalf of some of the members (feedback-givers) to pull together a set of heuristics or criteria that they could intentionally draw upon when giving feedback.

I also found that some members had changed their style of feedback-giving so that their comments would be more helpful and be taken more constructively by the receiver. At times, making the feedback more useful for the receiver meant toning down the “harshness” of their comment. For example, a young engineer contrasted his natural tendency to give “overly critical” feedback, with learning to become more “balanced” over time. For him, this involved “setting the context” for his comments and explaining his thinking behind the critique in more detail. Another member with a longer tenure echoed this sentiment, sharing her realization that she used to have a very “harsh, direct” style of giving feedback that resulted in “shutting people off.” She recalled receiving critical feedback from senior members about this “imbalance” in her manner of feedback-giving; she used the feedback to ensure that in addition to the directness of her comments, feedback-receivers also sensed her “care” and “good intentions.”

I found that some members directly credited the anonymity of the “feedback app” as helping them give feedback more constructively. One member explained it as: “Personally, I am pretty impatient and very judgmental. I do not deliver feedback in a very diplomatic way. Sometimes I delay in giving feedback to someone until I feel that I am emotionally ready.” This member remarked that “the anonymity of it [app] is really
important” because they “did not have to over think… [I could] just spit it out. It is so easy. I do not have to find the perfect time. I do not have to find the perfect words.”

For few members though, their growth in how they gave critical feedback was reflected in being able to deliver the comments in a more forthright manner. For example, one senior leader remarked how at one point he “could not give you direct feedback,” adding, “I would coddle the hell out of you.” But over time he had developed the capacity to “get to that level of directness, stay for a little while, and balance it out.” I also found that for few members, the more obvious and readily seen change in their style of giving feedback seemed to be accompanied by less visible process of chipping away at narratives – e.g., being a “people pleaser” or not wanting to come across as an “angry woman” – that guided their feedback giving behaviors. For example, a member shared that “if it was not for Next Jump, I would probably not be giving anyone feedback,” because she saw herself as a “people pleaser who does not want to get anyone upset.” She remarked that being at Next Jump had “changed me a lot” such that she was now “in the moment… able to share… thoughts… and then also have those difficult conversations and share feedback inside and outside of Next Jump.”

Self-Awareness and New Behaviors

As hinted in the previous section, and my exploration suggests, in addition to the specific improvements in how members gave and received feedback, some members also experienced broader changes in themselves along two dimensions. First, I found that members shared becoming more self-aware about how they thought, acted, and felt, including great awareness about their personal limitations or shortcomings. Second, some members remarked that they had learned to engage in behaviors that were previously outside
of their repertoire or comfort zone and saw the impact of this change in their non-work relationships as well.

I found that members frequently and spontaneously referred to aspects of their character that reflected an “imbalance” or shortcoming that they were working on to improve, as an example of having gained more self-knowledge. As one member emphasized:

In the last eight months, the stuff that I have learned about myself, I don’t think that I have learned 20% of that throughout my life… Walking in I did not have the faintest idea of what my backhand would be… The big thing that stands out to me now is that I am an extreme kind of person. I hurt a lot of people in that process of getting to perfection.

I found that several other members echoed this young engineer’s experience that they had come to more clearly understand their shortcomings and the underlying assumptions that motivated their behaviors. Members similarly spoke about coming to new realizations about how they tended to be “idealistic” or “skeptical” or struggled with having their “own point of view” or, on the other extreme, “valued their opinion very highly” at the expense of being open to other people’s perspectives.

Several members also went a step further and shared how they had changed on these “personal impediments” or shortcomings during their tenure at Next Jump. A member, for example, shared how he had changed from being a “black box” – e.g., did not voluntarily share any of his in-process work – to feeling more comfortable now “sharing and explaining my decision making along the way.” Another member reflected on how she was chipping away at her tendency to discourage others from sharing perspectives that challenged her work and had become more open “at least hearing what people have to say.” Further, for some members, these changes and improvements seemed to be validated when their close friends and family, who knew them far better, noticed these changes. A member explained:
You hear it [your backhand] from them [senior members,] and you are like, yes, I see it, but I am also not completely sure. [But] once you start uncovering it… as you start working with friends, you see how that [the backhand] creeps into your everyday… that the perception is true.

This member acknowledged feeling skepticism when she first heard someone else’s interpretation of her shortcoming, and how important it was for her when a close friend and her parents agreed that she needed to work on improving her communication skills. This highlights a belief frequently espoused by senior members, and echoed by several members: “The same you shows up everywhere.” It referred to the idea that whether someone was at work or outside, the individual’s strengths and weaknesses were evident and expressed in how he or she acted, thought, and felt.

My findings suggest that some members’ experiences of growth permeated their personal relationships. A senior leader realized that her efforts to be more patient in her coaching relationships reflected in her greater patience when her husband asked for help, and also in her conversations with her parents. As she clarified, “I take more time now to converse with them [parents]… It is motivating because I think people at home see the changes and they are appreciative of it.” This sentiment was echoed by another member who shared that, over the course of a year he had worked hard to improve his capacity to make this thoughts and feelings more transparent, especially when things were not going well. As he shared, “before, she [my wife] would ask me how things are going [and I would say] everything was just fine. But now I am more willing to share what is going on in my head and let her into my world.” He recalled feeling moved when his wife, whom he had been married to for over two decades, acknowledged his uncharacteristic openness and saw it reflected in their relationship. Another member shared that she had been working on her ability to express her points of view and emotions with greater self-assurance and
confidence. She remarked that the changes she had experienced reflected – unexpectedly – in her interactions with her husband:

I always shy away from expressing my feelings and emotions that I was going through because I always feel like if I'm going to start talking, I'm just going to start crying. I know that, and I don't want to indulge in this conversation. I would walk away, and he [husband] would get so upset. But it would be like, we are on our separate ways and nothing happened. That led us to not communicating so much on the personal… deep situations. But what is helping me here [Next Jump] is… now we go to the swamp. I don't run away from those conversations. I indulge in those conversations and try to go there because I feel like that's strengthening our relationship at home… That is something I am taking back from here to back home which is very powerful.

This member’s experience suggests that confronting difficult feedback and processing the uncomfortable emotions and narratives in collaboration with her training partner – navigating the swamp – was a capacity that she transferred into her personal relationships as well.

As my explorations revealed, if receiving and giving critical feedback were challenging experiences for members to navigate, many also shared how they had learned to be better givers and receivers of feedback. Members shared stories of developing “resilience” in the face of critical feedback and feeling more empowered to disregard feedback that did not measure up to their internal barometer. Similarly, members described shifts in the style and substance of feedback they provided, which at times, included crafting an emergent, internal set of heuristics to guide the feedback they gave. Finally, for some members, the changes in themselves were not limited to their feedback skills but were reflected in their personal lives and relationships as well.
Confirmation

My analysis suggests that relationships with co-workers were a core element of the experience of support for Next Jump members. I found that members, typically, characterized these supportive relationships along two dimensions: vertical bonds of safety and trust with their coaches, managers, or senior colleagues, and lateral bonds of trust with training partners. Further, I found that these supportive interpersonal relationships seemed to coalesce in the notion of the company as a “family” which engendered trust in the feedback-giver’s intentions for offering the feedback and within which feedback was an expression of care and investment in the individual’s well-being. I use the term “confirmation” to characterize this bouquet of positive and supportive experiences – safety, trust, the notion of being part of a family, feeling of being accepted despite personal limitations – that members described when sharing their experiences of Next Jump’s feedback culture.

Safety and Trust in Relationships with Coaches, Managers, and Senior Members

In my study, several members – across a range of tenures – reported interactions with their coaches, managers, and senior colleagues that were characterized by a sense of safety in the face of making mistakes, revealing shortcomings, and expressing challenging perspectives. I found that members recalled instances when they had made a mistake or

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21 The dictionary meanings of “confirmation” indicate a sense of acceptance, validation, and reinforcement, and this captures aspects of how members experienced the feedback culture when in the role of feedback receivers. A yet another meaning of “confirmation” reflects admission into an institution (religious or otherwise) upon affirmation of certain beliefs. This meaning of the term comes close to capturing the theme that giving and receiving feedback in a manner that is resonant with the dominant beliefs in the company also reinforces membership in the company (the “family”). Finally, the original inspiration for this term comes from Kegan’s (1982) constructive-developmental theory within which the term “confirmation” indicates acknowledging and recognizing the individual for wherever they are in their developmental trajectory. While I do not draw on this theoretical lens in this dissertation, “confirmation” captures the spirit of visibility of the whole-person that emerges as a theme in how members reported their experience with the feedback culture at Next Jump.
experienced failure for which they received feedback but did not experience the kind of negative career consequences or scapegoating that they perceived to be common in other workplaces. For example, a member shared an incident in which an initiative he had proposed and executed had failed, and as a result of which the company had lost money. Yet, as he recalled, “I never once was terrified that I was going to lose my job. It did not change my thought process in terms of like… if I do not figure this out, I am out of here.” As he shared, “no one beat me up… I did not get fired, and I did not get reduced in my role.”22 When the member did receive feedback from his manager, as he explained, “it made me think about how I interacted, how I communicated the material, what I did not do and share. I just got better through that awful experience.” Thus, for this member, having the room to fail helped him learn from the incident so that he could avoid repeating those same mistakes in the future, rather than get into self-protective “damage control.”

In addition, for some members, the experience of being accepted and acknowledged by their manager, coaches, and colleagues despite the weaknesses that were revealed by the feedback was a salient aspect of their experience. For instance, members echoed the sentiment that they valued coming to a work context where they could bring their frustrations or other difficult emotions and experiences. As one member explained, “this is an environment where you are allowed to not feel good, you are allowed to be upset, you are allowed to be pissed off. I have been in environments where you are not allowed to do that at all.” Some other members shared instances when going in front of the company and getting critical feedback had revealed areas in which they needed to improve – technically

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22 The theme of the company’s novel “no-firing” policy did not typically come up when members described their experiences with the company’s feedback culture. But one senior leader remarked that it was nonetheless an important factor since members knew that “you will not be fired for getting all 1s in your leadership 10X and that will not count into your compensation.”
and personally. But in the same breath, they expressed relief that at Next Jump they did not have to spend energy “hiding” these less polished parts of themselves. Instead, members recalled ways in which they felt their managers and coaches had supported them to improve in the areas where they were “imbalanced” rather than creating an environment of embarrassment and shame. For example, a member shared feeling less confident of his technical skills, for which, he suspected that he would have been asked to leave in a different company. Instead, his experience was that his manager, coaches, and senior colleagues rallied around to find for him other initiatives through which he could work on the areas which needed improvement. He shared, “the amount of care… the areas where they find ways to leverage me, so I can grow these skills is unique. I wouldn’t have this opportunity at other companies.”

Finally, I found in my explorations that several members valued the opportunities to share challenging perspectives and discuss uncomfortable topics with their coaches, managers, or senior colleagues. One member explained that it was common to experience anxiety when disagreeing with authority figures, but emphasized that it was “less scary” in the Next Jump environment:

I think Next Jump has an environment where you feel safe to speak up, and you can fully disagree. It can be hard to disagree with someone higher up… I have [disagreed] and it has been okay… and they encourage dispute and disagreements, so I am less nervous about sharing a different point of view.

I found that other members echoed this perspective that their coaches, managers, or senior colleagues typically encouraged them to offer their perspectives in one-on-one conversations. A young engineer explained how two senior engineers whom he worked with, had taken pains to know him and encouraged him to offer his thoughts on the projects in which they were working together. He attributed his improved capacity to share a
challenging view or opinions to the trust and “safety” in his relationship with these senior colleagues. Echoing this sentiment, a member with a longer tenure in the company shared that while he did not typically disagree with feedback given to him during the Situational Workshop, he generally felt comfortable sharing his questions or disagreements after the meeting by engaging the senior colleagues who had offered him the feedback in a conversation. He credited the “culture” for being able to voice his perspectives. As he explained, “That sort of openness [in the conversation] happens because of the culture… I don’t particularly see that if I was working elsewhere… see myself having those kinds of discussions in any other company.”

**Trusting Relationships with “Training Partners”**

My explorations suggest that for several members the trusting relationships they had with their “Training Partners” (TP) were crucial in helping them navigate the feedback culture. Specifically, members shared that it was important for them to have this “circle of safety” for two reasons. First, training partners were usually the first people with whom members got in touch with after receiving feedback; for many members, this relationship was important for processing emotions stirred during the interaction and gaining perspective on the content of the comments. As one member explained:

> If it [feedback] has upset me, I have to vent it immediately. My training partner sits next to me, so I can be like, I need to talk to you. Usually just letting steam out de-escalates whatever I am feeling… For me, it [emotions] are not going to get resolved in my own head. It is usually with the help of other people like my TP.

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23 This is, by and large, the norm in the company. With few exceptions training partners share a desk, a room, or sit next to each other.
My findings suggest that the TP relationship also helped members to hone their personal capacities for giving and receiving critical feedback. Some members indicated that their training partner was a vital source of honest feedback for them and often their harshest critic. I found that many members expressed a sense of “respect” for the opinions of their training partners, because as one member remarked, “my training partner sees me all the time.” A senior leader shared the following about how he and his training partner gave each other feedback:

The most important part of feedback is within the TP because… it is not easy to give critical feedback, face-to-face, and also to the close ones. You could have a fear of making them feel bad. That is the biggest barrier which we [she and her TP] were able to solve.

I found that this leader spoke to a kind of TP relationship that some people worked towards and aspired to achieve. For example, two senior leaders who were also training partners explained feeling empowered and safe to give each other feedback in a direct manner, even if it spurred disagreement or conflict in the process. They emphasized that the TP relationship offered a safer space in which they could practice and learn the skills of resilience and openness when hearing critical feedback. Another leader went on to share how his TP was willing to “challenge” him even if the feedback might sound “harsh” because they had “a lot of trust at the level of each other’s intentions.”

For some members, the TP relationship was also amongst the safest interactions where they could speak up freely with any concerns, or challenges and voice opinions without overly worrying about getting the words and style right. As one member shared:

It is just easier to talk things out to him on his face. I can give him a ton … and he is still very patient… I am not afraid of being judged by him. We are not afraid of going into terrified discussion or argument… that helps me to speak my mind.
This member highlighted a different quality of relationship with her TP compared to many other members, one that went beyond venting and seeking advice. For this member and her TP, the true test of the strength of their relationship was how much discomfort and conflict it could withstand.

Feedback in the Context of Next Jump as “Family”

My explorations suggest that the relationships of trust and safety – laterally and vertically – were threaded together and reflected the notion of the company as a “family.” For some members, their experience of the company as a “family” came with a sense of mutual responsibility about how they conducted themselves in their interactions with co-workers. As one member explained:

I am not okay having an open misunderstanding and letting it fester, because I think that ultimately to work together you have to be committed to each other. And it is not always easy. But I feel there is a call of responsibility because in this community you cannot opt out of other people in the community. Or you should not. You may choose to. But you should not.

This member highlighted the idea that being part of the community came with a responsibility to proactively address interpersonal dynamics, which if left unaddressed could harbor resentment. That is, just as the company had committed to support the learning and development of its members, for several members the reciprocal response was captured in this phrase: “You cannot break up with your family… we are all marching towards the same goal.”

The notion of “community,” in turn, emerged in my findings as an important factor that enhanced trust in the good intentions of the feedback-givers. “I generally believe that the intent of the feedback-giver is good,” a member explained, “because we are a family and community. These people are trying to help you… even if I don’t love the words or they
might... hurt me a little bit.” Another member summed the idea of feedback as an expression of “care,” as he reflected on how he wanted his team members to think about feedback:

Often when you get feedback, it is like “this person hates me, that is why I am getting feedback.” Versus, this person has taken so much effort in thinking about this which is why he is giving me feedback. So why not even constructively take it in and do something about it?

This member shared what he considered a common experience with receiving feedback elsewhere; critical feedback was associated with negative intentions on the part of the feedback-giver. In contrast, as he reflected, at Next Jump feedback was recast – from being an expression of “hate” to someone investing “effort” to offer ways in which the person could improve.

Several members shared their belief that senior leaders were giving them critical feedback for their improvement and growth, and not to be “gossipy or hurtful,” “mean and spiteful,” or for the personal benefit of the feedback-giver. This trust in the intentions of the senior leaders giving critical feedback seemed to be shaped by how well those receiving feedback felt that the feedback-givers knew them and their areas for growth. Members often recounted instances when a trusting relationship with a coach, manager, or member of the senior leadership team had played a part in how they had perceived, reacted to, or taken action based on the feedback. A young engineer, for instance, shared how important it had been for him to gradually develop trust in the judgment and intentions of his senior colleagues through frequent interactions with them. Over time, he not only came to know them well but also felt confident and safe to share his perspectives, even if these were challenging or went against the perspectives of the leaders. For this young engineer, these experiences were pivotal in the openness he had developed in receiving critical feedback
from them, and the value he gleaned from their insights. This example also pointed to the importance of relationships with senior members – coaches, technical mentors, managers – that have developed over some time. Several members shared their belief that such longer-duration relationships gave senior leaders a more comprehensive picture of the member’s strengths and weaknesses, versus someone (as reflected in feedback from the app) who had a more “snapshot” view of them. For some members feedback from people who knew them well seemed to be of higher “quality” and accompanied by a stronger trust in the intentions of the feedback-givers.

The idea of being responsible for the well-being of the community – that is, Next Jump – also helped some members in their role of feedback-givers. They seemed to draw confidence and solace from the idea that even when they were giving difficult feedback to a co-worker, it was ultimately in the receiver’s best interests. A member shared her feeling of “obligation” that “if I care about them, I should give them feedback.” Or as another member reflected, “Why do you think we give you feedback if we don’t care about you? People invest in you. That is why they are taking the time to give you that feedback.” This reflected a view shared by several members that, at Next Jump, counterintuitively perhaps, it was much more challenging to give critical feedback that balanced directness, care, insight, and value to the receiver than it was to receive critical feedback. The underlying rationale was that people would not put themselves through the uncomfortable experience of offering a co-worker critical feedback if they did not truly “care” about the growth of that member. “When you are truthful to people,” a senior member remarked, “it is emotionally exhausting. If I don’t care about you, I will not tell you the truth.” Thus, several members drew a connection between feedback and it being an expression of “care” and concern for those receiving it.
In summary, interpersonal relationships – upwards with senior members, coaches, managers and laterally with peers and training partners – emerged as a bedrock of the support system that enabled members to navigate the feelings of stretch within the feedback culture, and also develop new capabilities. Trust in the intentions of authority figures was enhanced by the leader’s experience in that domain and depth of insights – as perceived by the feedback-receiver. In contrast, for many members, trusting relationships with their training partner was a crucial source of comfort and safety within which they could practice having the difficult conversations that giving and receiving feedback demanded from them. Moreover, members drew upon the narrative of the company as a “family” in which their relationships with co-workers sustained and kept them going. This construction of the “family,” in turn, had a powerful influence on the nature and experience of feedback at Next Jump; it recast an interaction that in typical workplaces could be marked by mistrust, and doubt, into an expression of “care” and investment in each other’s wellbeing.

**Discussion**

Next Jump members shared a wide range of experiences from navigating the feedback culture in the company, but overall these were characterized by challenge, change, and confirmation. As I briefly explore below, many aspects of these experiences align with findings from feedback research, but with some notable differences in how members narrate and make sense of their experiences.

Most members shared that listening to critical feedback tended to initially trigger feelings of frustration, disappointment, or denial, which echoes insights from feedback research about why it is so hard to hear such feedback, particularly when it is targeted at the receiver’s character or personal attributes. For example, research suggests that people, in
general, prefer self-confirmatory feedback and will tend to resist or reject feedback that is perceived to be inconsistent with their expectations of themselves (Carver, Antoni, & Scheier, 1985; Ilgen & Davis, 2000; Swann & Read, 1981). That is, negative feedback is experienced as “psychologically threatening” (Northcraft & Ashford, 1990, p. 44) and thus results in the receiver’s “fight or flight” reactions, such as resisting the feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1983) and dismissing it (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979).

My inquiry suggests that Next Jump members’ difficult emotions or internal self-talk did not typically stay hidden; members shared the feedback they received with their TP, coaches, or other trusted colleagues. Further, for some members, being able to talk about the difficult emotions was the first step in diminishing their emotional sensitivity about the comments and moving beyond feelings of shame and embarrassment resulting from the feedback interaction. Sharing the comments seemed to give members greater psychological distance from the experience and was a way of stepping back – mentally – from the feedback and set of events which may have triggered the criticism. This kind of psychological ‘stepping back’ was also echoed by the members who spoke about feeling more in charge of their comments and having a newer capacity to consider comments as “data points” which they ultimately had control over. These experiences suggest a potential shift in members’ meaning-making, in the sense theorized by Kegan (1982) in the Constructive-Developmental Theory. From this theoretical lens, the new ability to take a more distanced, objective stance on the feedback comments could potentially signal a change in how a person knows rather than what a person knows, which from this theoretical lens signals psychological development.

The experience of personal change which several members narrated aligns with a well-established insight from feedback research that feedback is more likely to lead to improvements in performance when it provides the receiver information about meaningful
“goals” (Herold & Greller, 1977; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nujella, 2016). The feedback can be seen as offering data – evaluative and referent – about how well the person is doing in relation to meeting that goal. In the case of the Leadership 10X, the presenter’s “backhand” – personal limitation or weakness which the member is working to improve – might be seen as a tangible outcome against which members solicited and received critical feedback.

Finally, the finding that trusting relationships with co-workers – including senior leaders and training partners served to anchor the supports and experience of confirmation aligns with insights from feedback research. Literature suggests that the relational context in which feedback interactions take place has a significant impact on how the feedback-receivers perceive the feedback, accept it, and act on it (or not). As per this research, relationships of trust between feedback-receivers and givers (especially supervisors) tend to lower the costs and anxieties associated with soliciting and receiving negative feedback (Anseel, et al., 2013; Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2007; Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). For some members, the support they gained from their TP relationship went beyond being a space to vent concerns and anxieties or gain succor. These members conveyed an element of stretch and discomfort in their peer TP relationships – of being challenged and simultaneously challenging their colleague – which they found supportive. This texture of supporting and being supported is closer to the concept of “psychological safety” (Edmondson, 1999) which describes the perceptions that individuals hold about the “consequences of interpersonal risks in their work environment” (Edmondson, 2002, p. 6). Research lends support to this insight that “negative evaluation or criticism that is needed to trigger learning, is inherently psychologically threatening” (Edmondson, 2002, p. 130; Argyris & Schon, 1978). However, an environment characterized by “psychological safety” can lower the anxieties and
perceived costs of speaking up with challenging or uncomfortable perspectives and is a crucial element of learning at the team and organizational levels.
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

This study fundamentally emerged out of a desire to examine and understand in-depth how feedback interactions could be deployed organization-wide to help employees improve personally in areas that mattered to them. The use of feedback for such a purpose in the workplace – the improvement of the person – is unconventional and it stands in contrast to the more common uses of feedback for enhancing performance, process, and product. As I stated at the beginning of this dissertation, Next Jump is an “extreme” case as the organization’s profound dedication to the integration of feedback throughout the workplace is unique. A study of this organization offered a singular opportunity to capture a contextualized understanding of a feedback-rich culture, its on-the-ground workings, and the process of catalyzing feedback into learning. While organizations, more broadly, may not be able to integrate feedback as fully into their culture as Next Jump has, this ethnography demonstrates the powerful impact a deep feedback culture can have and highlights aspects of feedback that other organizations may consider incorporating into their own strategies. In addition, it is one of the few studies that examine the feedback interactions within the real-world dynamics of organizational life with the purpose of illustrating the underlying mechanisms by which organizational members navigate feedback interactions.

In this dissertation, I sought to address the following research questions: (1) what are the different mechanisms through which Next Jump members receive feedback and how are these feedback practices enacted in situ? (2) what characterizes Next Jump members’ experiences of giving and receiving personal feedback? That is, a) how do members navigate the feedback they receive? b) how do members interpret the feedback, respond to it, and what do they do with the feedback? and c) how does Next Jump’s feedback culture influence its members’ capacities to provide feedback, as well as, navigate feedback they receive and
learn from it? Below I describe the salient findings that emerged from this study, with a caveat. While some of the points below refer to connections that I inferred between particular aspects of the feedback culture at Next Jump, other findings are more descriptive. Moreover, where relevant, I also weave in implications for future research and practitioners.

1. Ritualizing feedback interactions can enhance participation and accountability. My findings showed that feedback interactions at Next Jump were, to a large extent, ritualized. That is, giving and receiving feedback took place as part of specific programs (e.g., Leadership 10X sessions, Situational Workshops, at the end of weekly staff meetings, and others) in which members were expected to engage in the role of feedback-givers and receivers. Moreover, these programs occurred consistently at regular intervals. I suggest that this ritualization played a significant role in the high degree of participation by Next Jump members in giving and receiving feedback. The structure, frequency, and the consistency of these programs eliminated some of the typical barriers to engaging in feedback. Feedback seeking research, for example, suggests that often people do not actively solicit feedback because of the “effort” costs involved in this process: for example, finding the feedback-givers, scheduling a meeting, and framing the issue. By forming specifically structured programs dedicated to the process of giving and receiving feedback, Next Jump was able to overcome some of these typical constraints to soliciting feedback. In addition to reducing costs in terms of the time and effort required to initiate feedback giving and receiving, the ritualization of the feedback programs also set expectations for employees, thereby making the process more a part of the culture of the organization.
2. **Anonymity for feedback-givers can foster speaking up.** Every member at Next Jump had the opportunity to give feedback anonymously. For some members, anonymity helped them to express what they had on their minds without feeling they had to get the words or tone right or worrying about how the receiver would perceive their comment. As a result, several members felt they could be more forthright in sharing their perspectives. Anonymity was particularly important for upwards feedback. Individuals seemed more willing to share feedback with senior members when there was less concern that the content of their comments would impact their job security or relationship with their superiors. Research from the areas of “organizational silence” and “employee voice” (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Morrison, 2014) tells us that many costs such as fear of loss of image, face, etc. can prohibit people from speaking up with challenging perspectives, and mechanisms for anonymously giving feedback can potentially help organizations spur feedback, especially upwards to managers, senior members, and coaches. My findings here are consistent with the literature.

3. **Offering feedback-receivers guidelines for processing feedback and intentional spaces for reflection can foster openness to critical feedback.** At Next Jump, when receiving feedback, members had several opportunities to reflect on and process the feedback comments. In their design of the feedback architecture, senior members had anticipated the difficulty and sense of threat commonly associated with hearing negative, personal feedback. They had thus placed significant – and compared to most workplaces, an unusual amount of – attention and emphasis on what would happen after the feedback was delivered. Keeping with the emphasis on rituals as a way to build habit and change behaviors, the opportunities for reflection were further supported with guidelines on how to engage in the process. For example, directly following the feedback interaction members
typically checked-in with a trusted peer (usually the member’s training partner) to help process the emotional side of receiving critical feedback. During these check-in sessions, members also had a chance to reflect on individual comments and consider how valid the perspective in the comment might be or not. These spaces for reflection were not only available after the interaction but during as well. For example, the interactions during the Leadership 10X sessions and Situational Workshops were designed so that feedback-givers and receivers took turns speaking. Receivers were required to remain silent as givers provided feedback, allowing the giver the full opportunity to share their feedback without interruption. The silence of receivers during the interaction could be jarring to observe as an outsider. However, for Next Jump members, these silences seemed to enable deep listening and likely, were a key factor in discouraging the more customary quick reaction to (and, often, rejection of) critical feedback that tends to be commonplace in many organizations that are not being intentional about cultivating a feedback environment.

4. Public nature of giving and receiving. Feedback interactions at Next Jump – especially during Leadership 10X sessions and Situational Workshops – did not typically happen behind closed doors, in private and confidentially. Members in these contexts received feedback in front of colleagues, whether three other colleagues as in Situational Workshops or several more during Leadership 10X sessions. Senior leaders also gave feedback in front of other colleagues in both settings. The public nature of the interactions was a reflection of the company’s beliefs that 1) only what is exposed can be improved, 2) receiving and giving in front of others provided more people in the company the chance to learn from each other, and 3) engaging in feedback in public would lower the sense of embarrassment or anxiety that is often associated with getting critical feedback.
Goffman’s (1956) research on face-work and presentation of self raises questions about the performative aspects of giving and receiving in-person feedback in public. In what ways might the feedback that was given by senior leaders during a Leadership 10X session (and less so in a Situational Workshop) be influenced by concerns of maintaining “face” – their own and that of the feedback-receivers? Considering this question in relation to Goffman’s work would suggest that feedback-givers might be moved to lessen the blow of the critical feedback in order to help their colleagues receiving the feedback in front of other people to save “face.” However, givers would have to strike a fine balance because if they overemphasize empathy at the cost of directness, they may not be seen as upholding and role modeling the espoused values and beliefs of the company with regards to good quality feedback. Thus, they may risk losing their “face” in front of the company’s senior members, their peers, and other members.

These “face” concerns may, to some extent, explain the emphasis that senior leaders placed on wanting to balance candor and empathy in their feedback and guarding against coming across as “brutal” in their comments. These types of concerns may also explain why during Leadership 10X sessions, senior leaders, whose comments were made in-person and in public, often justified the feedback ratings they provided. In addition, senior leaders often conveyed their hesitation when giving the criticism, by adding language such as, “my feeling is…” or “to be honest…” or “this is how it comes across to me.” The inclusion of these phrases could be seen as a signal to the receiver that these criticisms were not absolute truths but the feedback-giver’s personal and subjective interpretations and instincts from hearing the presentation.

The challenges that arise from the attempts of individuals within an organization to balance candor and empathy when providing feedback are unlikely to be unique to Next
Jump. The tone and content of feedback in any context reflect a balancing act by the feedback-giver. At Next Jump, this balancing act was often deliberate. As seen in Chapter 3, senior members spoke openly about the importance of sequencing directness before empathy, and also shared the tensions between being direct with their feedback and conveying care and understanding for the feedback-receiver. Since these tensions were openly discussed, Next Jump members could productively reflect on their own tendencies and the assumptions that guided their choices.

5. Nature of feedback. The nature of the feedback comments in Leadership 10X sessions and Situational Workshops was, unsurprisingly, personal in nature, since these programs were geared towards providing members with perspectives on how and where they needed to improve themselves. Moreover, along expected lines, I found that the comments during Leadership 10X sessions tended to be more critical and personal, whereas the nature of comments during Situational Workshops was geared towards supporting problem-solving for the receiver. Further, through my analysis, I identified five moves that members relied on when giving their feedback comments.

Feedback research has generally considered concrete and specific feedback more useful than general, vague feedback (Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Ilgen & Moore, 1987). Next Jump, however, emphasized providing feedback that came from givers’ intuitions, impressions, and skepticisms and often did not draw on the concrete actions of receivers. While this approach goes against the more traditional feedback process, recent research on creativity and feedback has proposed that feedback in creative contexts could be more useful to “generate additional exploration” rather than being “right” (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017, p. 2066). My research suggests that this recent conceptualization might be more aligned with
how Next Jump views the question of the specificity of feedback. One possible explanation for this finding could be that since the goal of the developmental feedback mechanism was to offer members a “psychological mirror” that would help them become more aware of their blind-spots, biases, and unhelpful mental tendencies, there was not necessarily an objective, single right answer. Or in case of a Situational Workshop where the individual was sharing a dilemma, there was not a single right perspective. Instead, presenters/receivers got a bouquet of data points – some were statements pointing out blind-spots, some were emotional reactions to the presentation, and yet others were suggestions to act or think differently. As Ilgen & Knowlton (1980) commented on attribution theory, “In spite of the fact that individuals observe the same “objective” level of performance [in relation to others or themselves] they may have different beliefs about the causes of the performance. As a result of these very different beliefs, we would expect the nature and type of this feedback to vary.” This variation in perspectives is precisely what Next Jump members seemed to leverage while giving feedback – the goal of each data point/feedback comment was to paint a picture for the receiver, that would open up new avenues of questions and reflections for those receiving feedback. At the same time, feedback emerging from an individuals’ ‘gut intuition’ – versus better-substantiated feedback – could be more vulnerable to distortions and biases. This also opens up the question of how to incorporate an ‘error detection’ process into this approach to increase the likelihood that the gut instinct is accurate. Next Jump’s approach to addressing this concern was to use technology (the feedback app and its functionalities) as a way to leverage the “collective intuition” of multiple feedback-givers so that no single feedback data point had a disproportionate influence.
6. Complementing experiences of challenge and growth. My findings suggest that experiences of challenge and growth were complementary at Next Jump. Members openly shared about the discomfort of processing critical feedback, but they equally emphasized the ways in which they had improved and learned to become better – at speaking up with their true thoughts, their understanding of how they tended to think, act, and feel, and at the resilience they had built when receiving feedback. Often, this kind of tension is treated as a paradox in which one side is at the expense of the other; in this case, however, for both the feedback-receivers and the feedback-givers, this tension was itself a source of personal growth.

7. Interpersonal relationships served as a crucial safety net. Next Jump members repeatedly referred to the relationships they shared with their colleagues and co-workers – coaches, training partners, managers, senior colleagues – as being a crucial lynchpin of what sustained them and helped them grow in their experiences in the feedback culture. Members also evoked the notion of the “family” to express the texture and nature of the support they felt in the company. As my study showed, these relationships were crucial in engendering trust in feedback-givers’ intentions for giving feedback – a factor that research suggests has a significant impact on how receivers perceive the comments, accept it, and take action from it (Anseel et al., 2013; Ashford, De Stobbeleir, & Nuijella, 2016; Ilgen, Fisher, & Taylor, 1979; Steelman, Levy & Snell, 2004). These relationships, especially those with training partners, also offered for some members the space to be challenged and challenge, rather than a space to be comforted.
Conclusion

The ultimate purpose of this dissertation is to redirect attention to the potential and challenges of feedback for learning purposes. Transformative learning is not possible if individuals and organizations remain caught in a web of self-sealing processes, where they buffer against and bounce off any corrective feedback. Feedback can offer people an insight into how their behavior produces the very results that they do not like or want. However, as the study argues, organizations cannot take this potential of feedback to advance human growth for granted. There have been very few qualitative inquiries in which feedback is studied within the context of real-life organizational dynamics. Thus, few images or blueprints, if any, exist of organizations that are deploying feedback towards this end of advancing learning and growth for all its members – feedback that can fundamentally help individuals move forward from wherever they might be in their developmental journey. Next Jump offers a complex, provocative, and ultimately promising picture of critical feedback and its deployment in service of members’ development at the organizational as well as interpersonal levels. It is my hope that this study can resonate with all those trying to improve feedback practice – which at its core reflects the deeply personal, and life-enhancing act of one individual offering deep attention to another.
### Appendix A: Data Collection Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Data Source</th>
<th>Specific Examples</th>
<th>Volume</th>
<th>Period collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation of feedback interactions</td>
<td>“Leadership 10X” sessions</td>
<td>5 sessions (15 receivers, 5 givers)</td>
<td>Nov 2017 – July 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Situational Workshops” meetings</td>
<td>6 sessions (15 receivers, 8 givers)</td>
<td>February 2018 – June 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Leadership 360” sessions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>February 2018 – April 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Email communication</td>
<td></td>
<td>October 2017 – July 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feedback on a digital platform</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation of company-wide events</td>
<td>“Leadership Academy”</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>November 2017 – June 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recruitment events</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>October 2017 – October 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition rituals</td>
<td>~6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>In-person interviews</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>February 2018 – September 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interview over Skype</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>October 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Background
  1. How long have you been at Next Jump?
  2. Can you tell me about what you are doing right now? How long have you been in this current role?
  3. In your time here has the feedback culture changed? In what ways? What aspects have shifted? What has stayed the same?

Feedback experiences
  4. What are the most meaningful ways in which you receive feedback?
  5. How do you process the feedback? What works for you?
     a. Does this look different when you are getting feedback anonymously?
     b. What have you learned about processing feedback?
     c. Has this process changed for you over time?
  6. Do you at times find yourself disagreeing with the feedback or comments (given in-person) or feel it is not resonating? How do you navigate such disagreements?
  7. What would you tell a new recruit about how they can prepare to successfully navigate the organization’s feedback culture?
  8. What do you do with the feedback you get? How do you use it? Can you walk me through a recent example?

Giving feedback
  9. What is your experience with giving feedback?
     a. Has this changed over time? In what ways?
  10. What heuristics do you rely on, even subconsciously, when giving feedback?
      a. Does this change based on which setting?
      b. Does this change based on whether you are giving feedback anonymously vs. in-person?
### Appendix C: Feedback-Giver Moves and Quotations by Context and Mode of Delivering Feedback

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback-giver moves</th>
<th>Content examples from Leadership 10X (anonymous)</th>
<th>Content examples from Leadership 10X (in-person)</th>
<th>Content examples from Situational Workshops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affirming</strong></td>
<td>I think you have gotten more self-aware</td>
<td>On the self-awareness part, like I have seen you develop over the past year</td>
<td>I feel you are doing what I have done that doesn’t work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wow did not know that about you. Very informative presentation. You were very vulnerable and held it together. You have the awareness.</td>
<td>What you shared in terms of for being a perfectionist as well as wanting approval, I think that resonated with me in terms of having actually worked with you</td>
<td>You tend to just work, put your head down and I can relate to that. Many of us introverts we get into a project and just work work work work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thank you for being honest and emotional</td>
<td>I think you have the realization.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I think your mindset and environment set up are right</td>
<td>I thought that was an honest audit of some of the events in the recent months, I thought you did a good job with that</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diagnosing</strong></td>
<td>You could have gone in more detail about certain problems that you addressed – example, high tolerance for uncomfortability. Few things missing for me within your presentation: Why don’t you want to be a burden? What experiences triggered this? Your practices felt shallow and I didn’t understand what your next steps were: those could have been clarified more. It seems as though you have a very small circle of trust.</td>
<td>I think, there is something in your TP relationship, that I think is the foundation. Even I guess going back and look at this presentation, I wonder did your TP really help you with this. It didn't have a lot of depth. I think it points to the way you and TP work and being able to like go there to uncomfortable situations, bring up uncomfortable situations, and bring it to light. You are not going to the swamp.</td>
<td>I suspect you probably don’t like asking for help, just the way you usually act and the way you work on your projects. So I think without that it will be harder to grow, not impossible but it will be harder.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

146
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback-giver moves</th>
<th>Content examples from Leadership 10X (anonymous)</th>
<th>Content examples from Leadership 10X (in-person)</th>
<th>Content examples from Situational Workshops</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For me what was missing was the root of why you are a black box. That felt a little superficial to me.</td>
<td>this high performing team, but the reality of the situation is that you should take a step back to work on being real with others.</td>
<td>I have my skepticism in terms of the growth… like does it really effect you that much that you want change, outside of the relationships, but more in terms of your work, in terms of how you actually execute on those things.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Questioning authenticity</td>
<td>I am still not convinced that your set up will help you catch yourself when following that thought pattern. Your reflections didn’t feel sincere enough</td>
<td>I am not convinced on your motivation to resolve this as I think in order to do this your practices need to be strong and consistent.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarifying concepts</td>
<td>“lying, hiding, faking” builds up super-fast. It is like building a muscle so you can react quickly. It is a mistake to treat your A performers this way. You should be more critical and have more expectations. Your backhand evolves over time. Don’t underestimate that as your role changes, what feels vulnerable will shift and the same backhand emerges in a different form.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising</td>
<td>You have the awareness but keep working at the execution. Give examples, dive deeper.</td>
<td>One thing that might help is if you actually keep that (feeling of being embarrassed to come to ten-year anniversary and how you will face others) as a reminder. Because you will quickly forget that feeling. And I feel like if you remember that feeling of how</td>
<td>One suggestion I might make is that if we did not run situational workshops we wouldn’t know you are training partners. What signals are you giving?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback-giver moves</td>
<td>Content examples from Leadership 10X (anonymous)</td>
<td>Content examples from Leadership 10X (in-person)</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you don’t do it already, I suggest practice of sending on my mind emails with your coach and TP.</td>
<td>it felt and how you felt embarrassed, you will push for change must faster. Like it could be keeping the pin right in front of you, keeping a picture of the jacket that has ten years written on it so you don’t forget that moment which will push for you to change harder. You need to figure out a way to put yourself out there, lot more than you have. Put yourself in stressful situation. This is an introvert’s worst nightmare. That’s my advice to you. Ask for help is one way you can gain trust from anyone. People under you, people above you, or people around you. That is the biggest element that can help you achieve practice on vulnerability.</td>
<td>Know when you need help, expose yourself to coaching help. Expose the approach. Hey guys, I am working on this, here are my first steps for the next three days or five days. This is my design, this is my approach, this is what I am doing. The whole exposing assumptions and approach would allow for a lot more feedback and comments rather than building a lot of stuff with the blinders on and then you roll your dice and see if it’s good or bad.</td>
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</table>
References


