



The Army urges counseling, personal performance tools, and after-action reviews (AARs) to promote reflection and improvement for individuals and organizations alike. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Joe Legros)

The Feedback Advantage: From Blind Spots to Breakthroughs

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The Army urges counseling, personal performance tools, and after-action reviews (AARs) to promote reflection and improvement for individuals and organizations alike. It is often said that feedback is a gift, but that common trope is inadequate in the warfighting profession. Gifts are often warmly accepted, briefly admired, sentimentally kept, and then unintentionally ignored. In a profession where marginal gains can make the difference between life and death, feedback must be treated as more than a polite offering.

At face value, feedback may appear to reflect how others perceive individuals, but on a deeper level, it provides an opportunity to see oneself through a different lens.

When viewed merely as a passive noun, feedback carries little weight; however, when employed as a tool, it enables precision improvement for both individuals and organizations.

The Johari Window provides a framework for understanding how feedback expands awareness and provides the opportunity and ability to improve effectiveness.

The Johari Window

The Johari Window is a conceptual framework that explains how self-awareness develops through information exchanged between an individual and others (Luft & Ingham, 1961).

The model divides awareness into four areas.

- The open area includes traits, behaviors, and knowledge that are known to both the individual and others.
- The blind area contains behaviors that others can see but the individual cannot, often revealed through feedback.
- The hidden area includes thoughts or experiences the individual chooses not to share.
- The unknown area represents aspects that no one yet recognizes.



When applied beyond the individual level, the Johari Window offers a useful way to think about how organizations use feedback to identify blind spots, expose hidden assumptions, and improve collective performance through intentional learning and reflection.

As individuals receive feedback and engage in reflection, information moves from the blind and unknown areas into the open area, increasing self-awareness and improving interpersonal effectiveness.

Later interpretations of the Johari Window emphasize its value as a learning and feedback tool rather than a static personality model (Oliver & Duncan, 2019). This perspective highlights how dialogue, trust, and shared reflection allow individuals to better understand how their actions affect others.

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Person-to-Person Feedback

The most common and the most immediate feedback occurs at the person-to-person level. Such feedback can be formal or informal.

Formal feedback occurs through structured processes that compare observed performance against established standards. Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Developing Leaders*, emphasizes that developmental counseling provides clear, timely, and accurate information to help individuals identify strengths and developmental needs in support of individual development plans (Department of the Army, 2022, para. 2-15).

Leaders also provide formal feedback during back briefs and mission briefs, when subordinate leaders present concepts of operation and receive input on clarity, decision-making, and alignment with the commander's intent.

These engagements allow leaders to reinforce standards, challenge assumptions, and shape performance before executing the mission. These actions help reduce blind spots, improve learning, and advance mission outcomes (Department of the Army, 2022, paras. 2-16 to 2-18).

Through these formal mechanisms, feedback functions as a deliberate tool that reinforces positive behaviors, expands self-awareness, and makes blind spots visible to the other person.

Informal feedback occurs continuously through daily interactions and often has the greatest developmental impact. FM 6-22 identifies day-to-day work as the most effective environment for development when individuals provide timely guidance, corrections,

and adjustments to behavior and performance (Department of the Army, 2022, para. 2-17).

Leaders provide informal feedback to reinforce expectations, shape judgment, and address blind spots in real time without having to conduct formal counseling sessions. Leaders also receive informal feedback for those same reasons.

When combined, formal and informal feedback mechanisms move information from the unknown or blind areas into the open, strengthening individual performance while setting the conditions for shared learning at the organizational level.

This same logic extends beyond the individual, as organizations rely on collective feedback processes to identify systemic blind spots, challenge assumptions, and improve overall effectiveness.

Person-to-Organization Feedback

People also provide feedback to organizations. This feedback provides leaders with insight into how policies, practices, and leader behaviors shape the command climate. This feedback is relevant not only to the commander, but also to the combined leadership, the climate, the system, or the overarching conditions.

One of the most common and important sources of organizational feedback is the Defense Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS), which supports command climate assessments by capturing Soldier and Army civilian perceptions from across the organization (Department of Defense, 2022). The DEOCS allows commanders to understand the organization from member perspective rather than through observation.

Effective organizations, however, look beyond the DEOCS for opportunities to receive and use feedback in the shape of surveys, sensing sessions, anonymous polls, anonymous comment boxes, or even social media posts. The focus is never about what individuals can do, but rather how the organization can do better or continue to do well.

People have ideas on improving the systems, communication, eliminating redundancies, or reducing waste, but how do organizations receive that feedback? From a Johari Window perspective, this is especially important for organizations with large *blind* and *unknown* areas.



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Organization-to-Person Feedback

Once organizations become aware of how they operate, their norms, their processes, their climate, and how those things affect their people, they can use that feedback as an improvement tool.

As commonly seen in DEOCS, commanders develop an action plan and communicate it back to the people, reinforcing transparency, accountability, and trust (Department of Defense, 2022).

When organizations acknowledge results and share intended actions, information moves from the *blind* area into the *open* area, creating shared understanding and enabling collective learning.

Other systems and processes provide cues to people about how the organization views individuals' value. Pay, bonuses, order of merit lists, awards, promotions, and academic evaluation reports are all forms of feedback when viewed appropriately.

Those wondering how they compare to others can look at these things to see how they stack up against their peers from an organizational perspective. Resources are also a clear value indicator. Want to know what or who an organization values? Look at the resources applied to that project, office, or person.

Deciding on How to Take Action

When organizations receive feedback, leaders charged with improvement must ask themselves two questions:

“What am I doing that I should not be doing? And what am I not doing that I should be?” (Moore & Guardia, 2017)?

Leadership is more than accomplishing the mission; it's also about improving the organization (DA, 2019). Developing ourselves and others are Army leader requirements.

Getting feedback on how you, your people, and your organization can improve is a start. Leaders who continually ask themselves (and their unit) those two questions are better equipped to develop solid action plans.

Following best practices for command climate surveys does not guarantee success. While leaders receive formal support from equal opportunity advisors and senior leaders, they must still apply their own self-awareness, judgment, and expertise.

This is why effective leaders also rely on enlisted advisors, mentors, and peers. It highlights a critical distinction: the objective is not to

build a bigger circle, but to have the right, trusted people within that circle.

When leaders receive person-to-person feedback, they are responsible for what happens next. To gain a complete picture, they must solicit diverse points of view from peers, subordinates, and even family members.

This process of gathering varied perspectives is essential for exploring the Johari Window. Because these viewpoints often conflict, a leader's final task is to reflect, discerning which feedback warrants action and which simply serves to build greater self-awareness.

In person-to-organization feedback, the focus-group methodology works well, but follow-up is necessary. The AAR, a similar feedback mechanism, should end with a list of priorities, suspense or retraining dates, and who is going to see the action through — pinning the rose, the essential act of assigning ownership for a task. The last part puts ownership on unit personnel.

Taking ownership of the organization at all levels is where real change happens. Command Sgt. Maj. Alexander Kupratty (2024) organized a junior enlisted council to solve problems on Fort Carson. This technique paired his decades of experience with a fresh perspective of those experiencing friction.

As a division command sergeant major, he could leverage systems and provide installation staff with ways to solve problems. By organizing this council, he reduced

the installation leadership's "blind area," solving known issues and mitigating potential new ones.

Albert Einstein pointed out that a benefit of getting fresh perspective on a problem is that people or systems that create problems can rarely solve them — "we have to learn to think in a new way" (Pugwash,1955).

Leaders and individuals must learn to treat feedback with tactical patience, recognizing that it does not always require immediate action. Often, observing enemy activity is more beneficial, allowing units to alter their course of action for higher payoff targets.

So, whether it's a personal attribute or a flaw in a system, some feedback may simply be a symptom of a larger problem, or maybe an anomaly.

Conclusion

The main goal of feedback is to get more perspective on your unit's or your own developmental needs. That feedback is only a tool, and it must be paired with multiple viewpoints.

When leaders pull insight from various sources, their "open area" becomes larger in the Johari Window. Knowing more about themselves and their unit means leaders are better equipped to develop action plans that help them start doing something they never considered before or stop doing something that prevents success. ■



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