STRENGTHENING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND ENHANCING CLIENT ENGAGEMENT

EXPLORING THE TWO-WAY STREET OF LEARNER FEEDBACK AND ITS IMPACT ON THEIR PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

BY SAMANTHA RUSH

As Learning and Development (L&D) professionals, we often seek feedback from our learners when they participate in a learning activity. Whether verbal, through a 'happy sheet', an online survey, or some other means, we frequently receive evaluations and suggestions.

> Supporting psychological safety so learners feel like they can engage in constructive feedback is important

But how often do we review and action that feedback? Do we update the providers of that feedback with how or whether we have actioned their comments? Have you ever wondered what the learners who give you feedback expect you to do once you have their comments? Or how their experience of giving you that feedback might influence their willingness to give feedback in the future?

Feedback from our learners, or the learner's *voice*, is an essential part of continuous improvement of our professional practice. *Voice* is defined as any human communication that is constructive in intent and focused on improvement. This information helps us to evaluate and improve the learning experience of our 'customers'. Invaluable feedback can take two forms: proactive (focused on improvement opportunities) or prohibitive (focused on issues or problems).

FOSTERING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety, or the feeling of being able to interact freely and engage with others, is crucial for learners to share honest feedback, especially when it highlights problems or errors. This perceived level of safety is a key consideration in someone's decision whether to voice their experience and suggestions. The level of psychological safety someone feels can be dynamic – it can change with different situations or with different people. Supporting psychological safety so learners feel like they can engage in constructive feedback is important because doing so not only brings benefits to them, but also to educational resources, the L&D team, and the broader organisation. Emphasising common objectives and showing respect for learners can support their positive perceptions of psychological safety.

The benefits for learners in sharing their voice include feeling a sense of control, pride in having made a positive impact, increased engagement, and higher job satisfaction.

Feedback helps to improve learning materials, which will result in a better experience for future participants. For the learning team and the organisation, feedback helps identify areas for improvement and fosters a culture of continuous development. An added benefit is that consolidated feedback can help to demonstrate the efficacy of the organisation's learning activities, providing opportunities to advocate for the hard work of the L&D team.

CREATING A PERCEIVED EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIP

The rewards of gathering learner feedback can come with a price for the organisation in the form of expectations from the learners, creating a perceived exchange relationship. This anticipated future exchange can manifest in various ways, including expectation of implementing offered suggestions and a sense of psychological entitlement. Understanding these expectations and their potential consequences is critical to managing them effectively.

The way feedback is received and responded to can significantly influence the emotions of the person who gives it. Each style of response—positive (such as encouraging), negative (such as dismissive), or neutral (such as no response)—can have a different impact on

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the emotions of the person who provided the suggestion.

For example, if feedback is well-received, the person might feel accomplished and valued. On the other hand, a negative response could make the learner feel anxious, and lead to their withdrawal. Interestingly, even neutral responses can sometimes cause anxiety, which emphasises the importance of conscious and thoughtful treatment of feedback.

THE EXPECTATION OF RECIPROCITY

When learners provide feedback, they often expect reciprocity—they anticipate their suggestions will be considered seriously and acted upon. Authentic consideration and transparent communication about how feedback is used can lead to a continuing cycle of reciprocity, where learners feel safe and motivated to continue engaging in learning activities and providing valuable input on their experience.

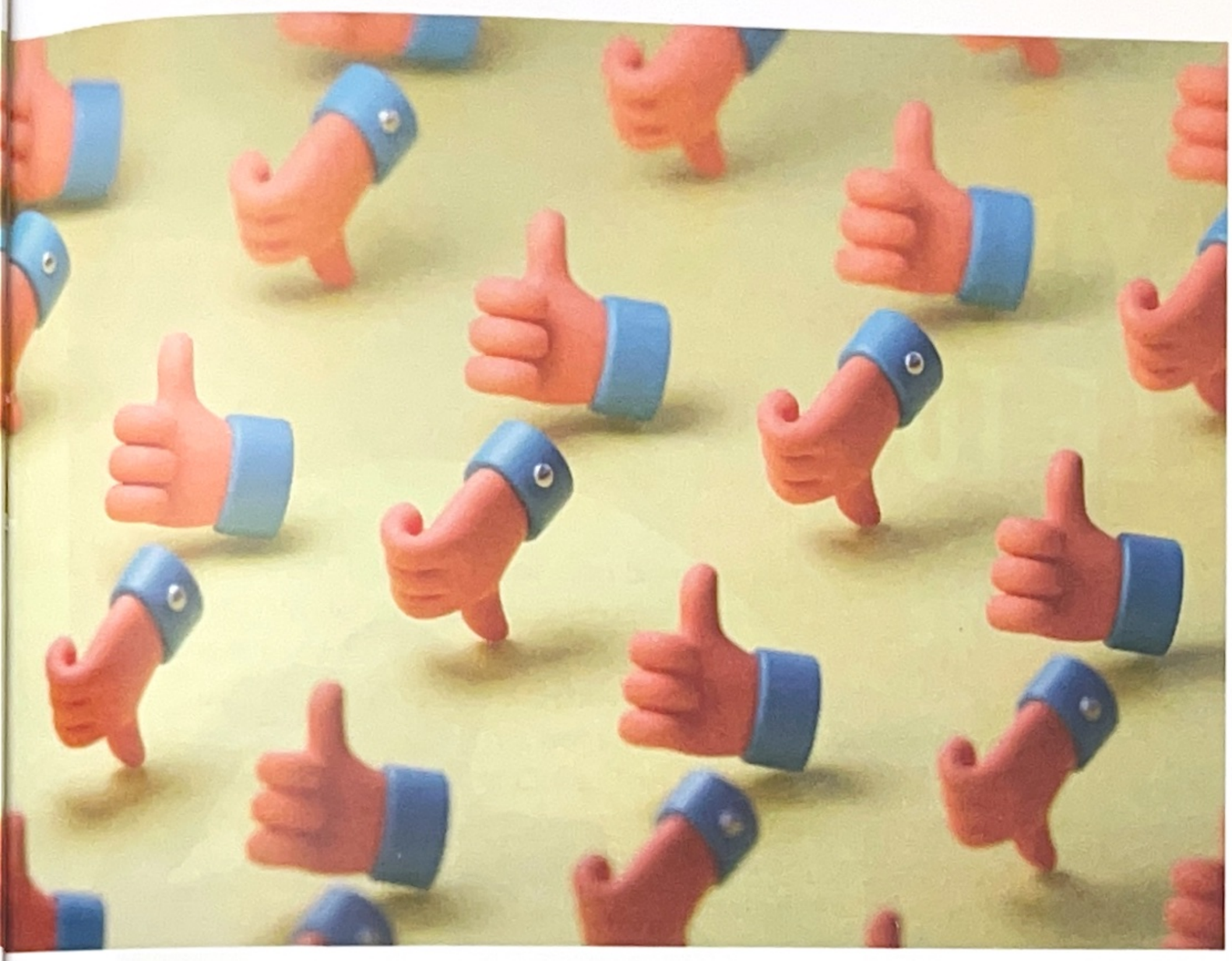
Failure to act on feedback or communicate reasons for not acting on suggestions can lead to a decline in positive workplace behaviours, such as participating in further training, providing future feedback, as well as leading to decrease engagement and productivity.
The second exchange expectation that can result from employees voluntarily contributing feedback is the expectation of special treatment, or psychological entitlement. For example, in exchange for providing suggestions, a learner might expect priority access to a training course. If these expectations are unmet, even if they aren't explicitly stated, it could result in the learner withdrawing from constructive behaviours, decreasing their levels of engagement and productivity.

The best way to avoid these negative impacts from perceived exchange relationships is clear and open communication. When seeking feedback, it is important to explain why it is needed, how and when it will be considered, and if or how the learner will be updated about how their input has been actioned.

PROVIDING EXPLANATIONS

If feedback cannot be actioned, it is important to provide a clear rationale as to why that is the case. Although sharing disappointing information, such as why someone's suggestions were not implemented, can be uncomfortable for all involved, research suggests that providing explanations can reduce negative perceptions and impacts significantly.
For example, one study examining the influence of explanations on perceptions and actions found that negative reactions (such as withdrawal) were nearly 45 per cent less likely when the rationale for a decision was clearly communicated.

Expectations about clear communication are even more pronounced with younger workers, who expect organisations to respect their suggestions and input for mutual benefit.



Younger workers tend to be highly motivated by internal rewards. They want to make a positive impact on the world and in their organisations. In addition, they want to be able to see the results of their work. In the case of providing feedback on their learning experience, they want to know how their input has contributed to a better future learning experience.

In conclusion, setting clear expectations and communicating the purpose and process of feedback transparently can enhance psychological safety and encourage learners to continue engaging in and sharing valuable insights from their experience. This approach not only improves the learning experience in the long term for all learners, but also builds a culture of trust and continuous improvement within the organisation.

SAMANTHA RUSH

Samantha Rush is an expert in decision-making. She has formal qualifications in Human Resources, Psychology, an MBA, and is currently undertaking a PhD. She combines this evidence-based knowledge with 20 years of experience across various industries and functions (including L&D). Drawing on her roles as a Corporate Executive, Company Director, Business Advisor and Consultant, Samantha helps organisations unravel complexity and facilitate great decision-making that drives results. She is passionate about fostering decisive cultures that recognise the importance of human cognition and behaviour while promoting confident and timely forward movement. For more information, visit: samantharush.com

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