

CHAPTER 4

How Do Different Ways of Knowing Influence How We *Receive* Feedback?

*No one cares how much you know, until
they know how much you care.*

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

After learning about ways of knowing, you might be wondering what they mean for your leadership in general, and for the ways you give and receive feedback in particular. We've found that these kinds of questions are quite common after one learns about constructive-developmental theory, no matter one's current way of making meaning. In this chapter, we offer an even closer look at the practical applications of developmental theory for making feedback more actionable and effective, with a particular focus on the ways adults' internal capacities will influence their experiences *receiving* feedback.

By way of example, you might fondly remember the supportive and just-right suggestions of a trusted principal, advisor, or mentor. You might conversely recall (with equal vividness) less pleasant conversations with a curmudgeonly boss, seemingly shortsighted supervisor, or even someone you love and admire. Yet a quick water cooler conversation in a professional setting could reveal that a supervisor you consider curmudgeonly and curt (a construction) could seem to your colleague like a no-nonsense motivator with an effective tough-love approach (a qualitatively different construction). Similarly, a boss who seems wishy-washy and ineffective to your colleague could feel to you like a supportive and sensitive guide.

Ultimately, these impressions are largely a matter of interpretation, and of our active and ongoing meaning making of our experiences.

As we started to explore in chapters 2 and 3, adults who make meaning in different ways can experience even the same leader, feedback strategy, or team context differently, and will require qualitatively different kinds of supports and challenges to feel well held developmentally. While this diversity of experience and meaning making may, at first, seem to warrant a “can’t please them all” approach to feedback (or a scenario in which the feedback giver simply sticks with a style that feels most comfortable to him or her), a developmental perspective can actually help us expand and diversify the kinds of feedback we offer so that others can more effectively hear, take in, and act upon our communications. In the sections that follow, we further unpack the connections between our developmental orientations and the specific feedback strategies and holding environments that will help us grow and learn.

REVISITING WAYS OF KNOWING: HONORING THE DEVELOPMENTAL DIVERSITY OF FEEDBACK RECEIVERS

As we described in chapter 3, feedback for growth needs to be given and received within holding environments that fit us well developmentally and gently stretch our developmental edges and boundaries. With this in mind, we thought it would be helpful to expand our discussion of ways of knowing to illustrate how adults’ different developmental orientations will influence their experiences as *receivers* of feedback. For each of the four ways of knowing more common in adulthood, we consider how adults’ orienting concerns for receiving feedback accord with particular supports and challenges, and we highlight areas for growth—what we refer to as “growing edges”—for adults who make meaning across the developmental spectrum.

As we did earlier, we invite you to consider, or “rent,” this information in three different ways: (1) to learn on an informational level about the theoretical and practical implications of how our ways of knowing influence our capacities for receiving feedback; (2) to deepen your understanding of how best to offer developmentally oriented feedback to colleagues, supervisees, supervisors, and other adults in your care; and (3) to gain deeper insight into your *own* experiences with receiving feedback. It is our hope that the following discussions, applications, and reflective invitations presented in this chapter open new possibilities for further strengthening your practice of feedback for growth in all three ways, and that they begin to

illuminate the promise of feedback for growth as a critical element of effective holding environments.

Instrumental Knowers as Feedback Receivers: “Tell Me What I Need to Do”

As we began to consider in chapter 3, adults who make meaning with an instrumental way of knowing tend to see the world in concrete, dualistic terms: they believe that there are right and wrong answers to problems, and right and wrong ways to think and behave. Because instrumental knowers are run by fulfilling their needs, wants, and desires, they respond well to feedback that helps them understand *exactly* what they need to do to achieve these ends, and what kinds of obstacles might get in their way. In light of this, adults who make meaning in this way feel most supported by (a) tangible examples to guide practice and change (e.g., models, rubrics, step-by-step instructions); (b) the perception of a supervisor’s consistency and fairness (i.e., the feeling that leaders do not offer conflicting directives or ask different things of different people); and (c) external rewards for good performance (e.g., public recognition, high evaluation scores, increased pay, or other forms of promotion). As one teacher leader recently shared, “I want to feel like I’m walking away from feedback with my principal with pragmatic strategies and a clear understanding of what’s expected of me. I like to know what’s expected of me. In fact, I really need that.”

Of course, there are times when all of us need concrete information and clear expectations in our work and professional learning. For adults with *any* way of knowing, for instance, it is incredibly important to become familiar with organizational policies and routines, especially when beginning a new job or taking on a new role. (Plus, it’s always helpful to have a clear sense of what’s most important to one’s boss or supervisor, and rewards tend to feel good to most people, too.) For instrumental knowers, though, the need for explicit, concrete feedback runs deeper than just “learning the ropes.” For these adults, concrete feedback accords with the fundamental ways they are making sense of their work and the world, and thus are not means to an end, but rather ends in and of themselves.

Growing edge: Instrumental knowers

While it can be incredibly powerful to offer concrete feedback to colleagues who are more instrumental in their meaning making—as this can serve as a “tuning in frequency” to help them best take in, learn from, and implement your suggestions—teaching and leading today often require adults to look beyond “right” and “wrong” solutions, and to think abstractly and

make connections across contexts and situations (all of which would likely feel like a stretch developmentally for instrumental knowers). That is why, thinking back to our previous discussion of holding environments, we need to offer a careful balance of both supports *and* challenges when offering feedback for growth and change. In other words, while it is important to first meet someone where she or he is developmentally so she or he can hear and take in what you're trying to say, feedback for growth also involves tapping gently at the edges of a person's thinking or meaning making in order to support growth. By this we mean carefully and caringly encouraging a person to "reach up" and "try on" some of the skills and capacities that currently lie just beyond her or his reach (much like Vygotsky's famous conceptualization of the *zone of proximal development*¹). This kind of intentional stretching can help all of the adults in your care grow more sophisticated internal capacities for managing their work and responsibilities. For instrumental knowers in particular, it can help them more effectively approach the mounting adaptive challenges in education that, by definition, come without clear or ready-made answers.

Socializing Knowers as Feedback Receivers: "Make Me Feel Valued"

While socializing knowers have developed greater internal capacities for abstract thinking and relating, and are no longer run by their needs, interests, and desires, they *do* feel responsible for valued others' feelings—and in turn hold those others responsible for their own. Since socializing knowers orient so strongly to the interpersonal dimensions of feedback (e.g., kindness, care, relationships), it is important to acknowledge and attend to these when giving feedback to educators who make meaning in this way. As discussed previously, the feedback, opinions, and assessments of important others actually *become* socializing knowers' own self-assessments. Understanding this helps us to see that they will feel most supported by feedback that: (a) couples constructive feedback with authentic affirmations and demonstrations of confidence (e.g., acknowledgments of hard work, contributions, and/or positive characteristics); and (b) *decouples* critical assessments from larger personal or professional judgments (e.g., "You're a really good teacher/person, and I think it's important to work on X"). In other words, you can support socializing adults' growth by helping them to understand that while they may still be learning (as we all are), their hard work is appreciated, and they are valued members of your organization. As one teacher who makes meaning in this way expressed it, "When I feel cared for and respected, my confidence just soars. When somebody believes in me and cares what's happening, I feel like I can do anything!"

Growing edge: Socializing knowers

Because socializing knowers tend to subvert their own ideas and assessments to those of valued others and authorities in order to avoid conflict with them and/or maintain important relationships, it can be hard for them to really take in, respond to, or implement critical feedback if it is not offered with developmental intentionality and care. As Nelson, a middle school science teacher, recently told us: "Critiques from my principal leave me doubting my own abilities. I'm constantly apologizing for things I'm not even sure I did wrong, and it takes me a pretty long time to recover and get my confidence back after meeting with him. And it's too bad, because instead of putting myself out there and trying new ideas, I'm holding back and playing it safe by focusing on what I already do well. I guess I just don't want to look incompetent."

Importantly, when working with socializing adults, you can establish feedback encounters as safe contexts—holding environments—that convey important information *while simultaneously supporting the development of adults' emerging internal capacities*. For example, offering constructive feedback with developmental intentionality can help socializing knowers take in critical assessments in ways that feel supportive and actionable, rather than threatening or deflating. You can also approach feedback conversations with adults who make meaning in this way as invitations to explore and express their *own* ideas and opinions, even when they conflict with your own. In other words, by caringly and genuinely encouraging socializing adults to share their thinking, assessments, and beliefs about practice as part of feedback conversations, you can help them to gently stretch their capacities for communicating, collaborating, and contributing in new ways. One educational leader recently captured this powerful idea as follows: "Feedback can sometimes be a tool for helping people to realize their untapped potential."

Self-Authoring Knowers as Feedback Receivers: "Let Me Demonstrate Competency"

Unlike socializing knowers, self-authoring knowers have grown the capacity to more comfortably take a stand for their self-generated values, assessments, and ideas. They also assess other people's expectations for and judgments of them in light of their own. So, when considering another person's feedback—whether a colleague's or a supervisor's—self-authoring knowers will decide *for themselves* what they want to improve and what they're doing well (even while understanding that some things may be mandated or non-negotiable).

For example, Andrés, an elementary school principal, recently shared the following about his experiences receiving feedback as a self-authoring knower:

I have really strong personal preferences about receiving feedback, which I don't think I always consider in the people I manage. I really crave space in a conversation. I'm creative, and I'm results driven, so I love to think about problems and generate creative solutions. That's what I live for, really. So I really value my intellectual engagement and autonomy. It's important for me that the person giving me feedback recognizes that—even just the fact that I care about it. So if they have to be directive, I really appreciate someone saying, "I know you'd like the time to think deeply about this, but what I'm telling you now is X has to change in this way, because . . ." That recognition means a lot to me.

Like Andrés, self-authoring knowers tend to value opportunities during feedback sessions to voice their opinions, offer suggestions and critiques, and formulate their own strategies and goals. Perhaps not surprisingly, they may even have some feedback for you! Nadine, for instance, highlighted her need for reciprocity during feedback as a teacher leader: "When receiving feedback I always have a lot to say and I want to be given the time to explain why I did what I did. In addition, I usually have questions for the person giving me the feedback, and I think it's important to have time for this. Feedback should not be an A-to-B format. It should be a back-and-forth dialogue between the two parties."

Growing edge: Self-authoring knowers

Because self-authoring knowers are deeply invested in demonstrating competency and excellence *as they define it*, they can have a hard time opening themselves to critical feedback, especially when they perceive that feedback to be in conflict with their own plans or ideas. As one school principal recently said, reflecting on her stance as a self-authoring leader: "I have a really strong sense of vision, and a firm stance on what excellent teaching looks like. I work hard to listen to my teachers and their feedback, but I know what I want to accomplish and what needs to be done in my school. I just do. It's not quite tunnel vision, but it *is* intense focus and determination." Understanding that self-authoring knowers cannot yet objectively see their own value propositions and ideologies (or critique them) has important implications for how you accompany them in their professional

development with your feedback. Gently encouraging these adults to consider and then explore new ideas, alternative framings (e.g., "Have you considered...?"), and directions—in your private conversations, on teams with other colleagues, or even through new leadership roles that require the negotiation of differing perspectives and agendas—can help them more effectively seek and see common ground, and more openly embrace new possibilities for improving practice over time.

**Self-Transforming Knowers as Feedback Receivers:
"We Can Figure This Out Together"**

For self-transforming knowers, receiving feedback is often understood and experienced as a cherished opportunity to co-construct interpretations, understandings, and value propositions with colleagues and supervisors. Put another way, self-transforming knowers recognize the value of juxtaposing and learning from different perspectives, paradoxes, and ideas, as these apparent differences can illuminate new knowledge and open paths of possibility. One veteran educator who makes meaning in this way recently reflected on the value of feedback as follows: "We require an 'other' both to point out the areas of growth we did not know about, and also to point out the areas that we did know about, but were too afraid to address." Offering feedback to self-transforming knowers is really about inviting them into conversations, about learning with and from them in genuine, intimate, and promising ways. Creating spaces for the two of you to learn together—with and from each other—is vital as well. As another self-transforming educational leader said, "Feedback is an invitation to grow—to experiment, take risks, excel, and to stumble—and all of these are good things."

Growing edge: Self-transforming knowers

Even though self-transforming knowers have developed the capacity to see and seek commonality in seemingly opposing viewpoints and perspectives, it can be incredibly hard and painful for adults who make meaning in this way to engage in feedback encounters that do not position them as active and collaborative participants. For example, Evette, a veteran teacher at a charter high school, was very disoriented and disappointed when her principal gave her an "emerging" rating on her interim teaching evaluation for instructional technology use, but would not debrief or discuss the mark with her at length. "Can you please help me understand this feedback?" she asked, genuinely curious about the rating. "Evette," the principal replied, "you're sterling at just about everything—top notch. Everyone has something they need to work on. Just let it go." Because Evette was genuinely

interested in learning more about teaching with technology, she asked again for a chance to dialogue with her principal in order to learn more about her principal's ideas. When he told her that he "didn't have time to dive in right now," and that she should "just talk to some colleagues" about their strategies for incorporating technology in the classroom, Evette left the meeting feeling disappointed. As she shared, "I understand that I still have many things to learn, and that there will always be new things I could do to grow myself and my teaching. Still, it would have been so much more effective—so much more meaningful and respectful—if my principal tried to understand the thinking and intention behind my practice, and shared at least something about his own understanding of the issue." For Evette, the problem wasn't just that she didn't have a chance to defend her current use of instructional technology (although part of her was willing and prepared to do so), or that the principal wasn't forthcoming with helpful tips to guide next steps; what was really hard for her, she explained, was that she felt "in the dark about the thinking *behind* the rating"—that she didn't even have a clear sense of the principal's perspective on instructional technology and its purposes in the first place. As she continued, "I feel badly that I didn't have a chance to learn from my principal's reasoning, or a chance to expand my own. I'd really like to come together around this."

While the principal's "drop and go" feedback style, as Evette referred to it, may have felt just as uncomfortable to adults with other ways of knowing for these and other reasons, this example helps illustrate the importance of being of good company with and for self-transforming knowers during important moments of collaboration and feedback. Given the implicit contradictions, paradoxes, and tensions of education today—and also the urgent pace of learning and leading in schools—adults who make meaning with a more self-transforming way of knowing may need extra support and acknowledgment when leaders need to make unilateral decisions or act without consultation. Helping self-transforming adults more clearly recognize and understand the rationale behind these actions, and remaining open to involving them in other ways moving forward, can support these knowers as they strive to take even greater perspectives on themselves, others, and the intricacies of working together.

Ways of Knowing and Receiving Feedback

As we have now explored in some depth, adults who make meaning in different ways will have different needs and preferences as feedback receivers, and this has important implications for the kinds of feedback we give to others with caring attention. To summarize, in table 4.1 we highlight key

TABLE 4.1

Feedback supports and challenges for adults with different ways of knowing

Way of knowing	Feedback supports ("tuning in" frequencies)	Feedback challenges (stretches for growth)
<i>Instrumental</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer concrete suggestions, models, and examples. • Recognize what went right and wrong. • Provide clear and explicit expectations. • Remain consistent with your message, suggestions, and directions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage looking beyond only one "right" and "wrong" solution or path for teaching and leading. • Scaffold abstract thinking and comparison of ideas across different situations.
<i>Socializing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice appreciation for effort and contributions. • Validate progress and personal qualities. • Begin with a sincere acknowledgment of personal value of the person's instructional practice and/or leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite expression of recipient's own beliefs about practice in safe contexts. • Model and role-play conflict that does not threaten relationships. • Distinguish constructive feedback as separate from your assessment of colleague as a person.
<i>Self-authoring</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge competence and expertise. • Provide opportunities to discuss recipient's own ideas, develop recipient's own goals, and critique and design initiatives. • Invite person into leadership roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage exploration of new and different ideas, values, and approaches—both professionally and personally. • Invite person to be a facilitator in general and especially in relationship to a proposal about which there is disagreement.
<i>Self-transforming</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite into collaborative reflection on practice and exploration of alternatives, contradictions, and paradoxes (internal and systemic). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gently support the management of the implicit frustrations and tensions of transformation and change. • Offer support as recipient makes sense of internal and systemic contradictions and inconsistencies.

developmental supports and challenges you can use to shape your feedback conversations as genuine holding environments for adults who make meaning with instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, or self-transforming ways of knowing. Importantly, these strategies can help us imbue our feedback with a developmental component regardless of content or context (i.e., be it a formal or informal feedback relationship, team, professional learning

community, or other collaborative practice). In the chapters that follow, we will dive even deeper into the process of giving, receiving, and differentiating feedback within, and as an expression of, genuine holding environments that support professional growth and capacity building.

To further synthesize the connections between adults' developmental capacities and their orientations to receiving feedback, we offer in table 4.2 a concise overview of ways of knowing and feedback that can be easily shared with colleagues. In working with educational leaders of all kinds over many years, we have found that sharing the language and ideas of constructive-developmental theory—even in small ways at first—can make a powerful difference in the collaborative culture of any school, team, or organization. We hope you find this a useful takeaway as well.

Of course, when you are reflecting privately about and/or sharing these ideas with others, it is important to acknowledge the complex business of both having and “diagnosing” ways of knowing in our feedback and leadership. No matter where we fall on the developmental spectrum, or where those around us are and aspire to be, we often live much of our lives in transition, or in the spaces between two dominant ways of knowing. Indeed, as we stretch and strengthen our developmental reach and expand our internal capacities, we inch forward toward more sophisticated and more complex ways of seeing and being in the world and with others. Because of this, and because surface behaviors alone (i.e., what we notice people *doing*) are not always indicative of a person's way of knowing, it is imperative that we consider these ideas with and for each other with open hearts and open minds. The chance to walk with another person in good company and confidence as you explore questions, problems, and hopes for practice can be an incredibly powerful gift and opportunity, one that recognizes the fundamental dignity and fragility of the people around us (and ourselves) without letting go of the urgency of the demands we face together.

Applying your learnings

As we have been exploring, adults' ways of knowing directly influence how they orient to, feel about, interpret, and take in leadership, authority, and suggestions for improved practice. All of these are key as we strive to make our feedback more meaningful and actionable. Because leaders of all kinds often need to listen carefully and caringly to others as a first step in understanding how colleagues might be making meaning (and especially before building a shared developmental language), in exhibit 4.1 we present a series of vignettes that illustrate four different teachers' reflections on their experiences receiving feedback from supervisors. We present these without

TABLE 4.2

Understanding how adults with different ways of knowing orient to receiving feedback





	WAY OF KNOWING			
	Instrumental  "me"	Socializing  "you"	Self-authoring  "I"	Self-transforming  "we"
When receiving feedback, I . . .	Need to understand the rules—that's what helps me in my work.	Internalize others' feelings and assessments of me and my instructional practice as my own.	Listen and yet feel that I still hold firm to my own values and beliefs.	Seek to grow myself further through interconnection with the person offering feedback. I want to grow myself.
When receiving feedback, I am most concerned about . . .	Meeting my own needs and getting it "right." It's important to me.	Ensuring that others think highly of me and like me regardless of my work.	Demonstrating my competencies and sharing my perspectives.	Seeing deeper into myself and my practice with trusted others. I want to talk with my supervisor. I want to grow from our conversation.
When receiving feedback, I wonder . . .	What's in it for me? What did I do right? What did I do wrong? What do I have to do to get a reward and/or avoid punishment?	What do you think of me? Do you still like me even when I'm not teaching as you think I should? Do you think I'm doing a good job? Do you think I'm a good person?	How will your feedback better help me reach my goals? Do your suggestions and ideas align with my own understanding of next steps to grow my practice and myself?	How might you see into me and my practice in new and important ways? How can I learn from your perspective? How can I become a better teacher and leader?

TABLE 4.2 (continued)

WAY OF KNOWING

	Instrumental "me"	Socializing "you"	Self-authoring "I"	Self-transforming "we"
When receiving feedback, I feel most supported when you . . .	Offer me concrete suggestions, models, and examples so that I can get things right in my practice of teaching. Clear and explicit expectations really help me. I need to know so that I can get better.	Offer me sincere appreciation for my work and contributions. It feels supportive and I feel good about it and you. Personal and professional validation means a lot to me.	Explicitly recognize me and my competence and expertise. It feels like you respect me. Opportunities to discuss my own ideas and develop my own goals when we meet feel supportive to me. I appreciate that a great deal.	Invite me to collaboratively reflect on my practice and yours, and when we explore new ideas, alternatives, and paradoxes together. It feels supportive to me, and I hope it does to you as well.
When receiving feedback, it feels challenging when . . .	I am asked to reflect on competing alternatives or decide between multiple options when there is no clear answer. I would like you to tell me what I need to do, please.	I am asked to share my thinking without knowing how you or other leaders feel first—especially if I am given negative or critical feedback about my performance.	I am presented with ideas or perspectives that directly oppose my own, or that call my competency into question.	Others do not include me in the processes of feedback or planning for next steps. It's hard for me when there are so many rules and when we do not address paradoxes—both systemic and on our team. While I understand that conflicts and differences of opinion that are resistant to resolution are part of our work, it's still hard for me.
In terms of receiving feedback, I think I need to get better at . . .	Understanding others' feelings and perspectives; acknowledging when challenges may not have one right answer. I wish everyone would just follow the rules.	Taking in constructive criticism without experiencing it as dislike of me personally.	"Hearing" seemingly opposing viewpoints or ideas that are so different from my own thinking.	Accepting that I cannot solve every problem and conflict; I really want harmony. Recognizing when I need to hold back in hierarchical systems and structures.

identifying each teacher's way of knowing and in no particular order. We hope you find this a meaningful opportunity to apply your learnings from this chapter to practical case examples. These vignettes can also be a helpful heuristic for sharing and discussing key aspects of feedback for growth with colleagues.

To help guide your reading, we invite you to consider the following investigative prompts:

- With which way of knowing do you think each teacher is making meaning? You may find it helpful to underline or circle evidence in each vignette that points to one way of knowing or another. (You may also see a glimpse of two ways of knowing operating. If that is the case, please try to determine which way of knowing is dominant.)
- What seems supportive to each teacher? Challenging? How might this relate to his or her way of knowing? (You may find tables 4.1 and 4.2 helpful points of reference/comparison.)
- Do you think that it could be the same leader offering feedback to each of these teachers? Why or why not?

Diving deeper: Analyzing the vignettes

When analyzing the vignettes for developmental clues, we've found it helpful to zoom in on indicators that point specifically to meaning making (e.g., orienting concerns, things that seem to be either "subject" [something a person is "run by"] or "object" [things a person can take a perspective on and control]). More specifically, what is each person able to take responsibility for? What, for each person, seems to be outside of or within his or her control? What do you think is *most* important to each? Next, we briefly revisit all four of the vignettes and highlight specific evidence that suggests, from our view, each teacher's particular way of knowing. We hope this is useful to you.

Beginning with the first vignette, Andy's reflections point strongly to a socializing way of knowing. What seems most important for Andy is having the principal's approval, and the sense of her genuine care. Specific feedback supports named in the vignette include expressing appreciation, engaging in private conversations, and, as Andy puts it, highlighting "the good things I'm already doing." Challenges, or growing edges, arise for Andy when the principal solicits reflections and ideas *without* first sharing her own. Ultimately, Andy's identity and self-assessments as a teacher seem intimately bound with the principal's. As Andy explains, when the principal communicates confidence and encouragement, "it makes me want to

EXHIBIT 4.1

APPLICATION EXERCISE

Advancing Your Practice: Four Teachers Making Meaning of Their Supervisor's Feedback

ANDY'S REFLECTIONS

My principal gives *great* feedback. Her comments make me feel like I'm doing a good job, and they give me confidence. Even when she offers suggestions for improvement or little critiques on my practice and leadership role, I know that she's offering them because she really cares about me—not just as a teacher, but as a human being. That makes a huge difference to me—that she cares about me as a person. It makes me want to do more for her, and really, she gives me the courage to try new things to be an even better teacher. I want to be a better teacher, and I know my principal can help me be better. She has a lot of great ideas and suggestions, and I'm very grateful that she's willing to share her expertise and experience with me. Sometimes, when she has an idea for me, she pulls me aside privately to talk about whatever it is that she's thinking about. It might be about something she observed in my classroom during an observation or an idea for how I might help out in a faculty meeting or school event but—whatever it's about—she always shares it in a way that feels constructive, and also points out the good things I'm already doing. I like that she doesn't embarrass me; that means a lot to me.

Sometimes, when she tells me that I didn't do something quite right in my teaching, I feel so badly. I don't like to disappoint her. But, when she says something like this, she also lets me know that she can tell I'm really trying, and that makes me feel better. She makes me feel like I am an important part of the school—like I am contributing—even if I'm still learning about a lot of things. And she is very patient with me. I feel like I matter to her. If she didn't do that, I think I'd feel like, "What am I doing here? Maybe I should just leave this school and find somewhere else to go." I've been in situations like that before, and the mean feedback I've received from other bosses never helped me do better at all. They pretty much just made me more nervous and I felt like I actually did worse, even though I was *really* trying to do better. My principal now, though, she works really hard at helping us all to feel appreciated, and to have a sense of our school as a real community—a place where we're all making a difference. She likes us. It's hard being a teacher, I think, and she lets us know that that's okay. I feel like she really understands, even when she doesn't say that out loud. I just feel it—do you know what I mean?

In terms of something that I find unhelpful, I'm not really sure. A lot of times at school, she'll say, "Andy, what do you think you should do?" Or, "Andy, what do you think about this or that?" Or she'll ask me what I thought of a colleague's idea or something that I'm struggling with in my teaching. It's really not helpful to me when she does this after I've asked her a question about something that I don't understand and ask for her help with. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to learn new instructional practices if she doesn't tell me what she thinks I should be working

on. I ask her questions when I'm not sure about what's best. Plus, when my colleagues give me feedback on my instruction, they usually just say what I do well.

TAYLOR'S REFLECTIONS

My principal is most supportive in her feedback when she speaks with me openly, honestly, and without artifice. I feel that she really understands that what motivates me the most is the fluidity and mutuality of our conversations about teaching and our school, and the chance to explore new possibilities for improvement together. After observations, I always bring ideas about what I can or should be doing differently in my classroom, but it's incredibly helpful to consider my practice from her perspective. I obviously can't do that alone. In this way, I truly welcome my principal's feedback—whether it's positive or critical, formal or informal. We've actually come a long way together, and I really value our relationship and the unique lens she brings to my teaching and to our school. Her experience is both similar to and different than mine—and I consider her a valued and insightful thought partner.

Related to this, something I really admire is her commitment to empowering everyone in our school—teachers *and* students—to shape the vision of the school. We work together collaboratively; we *are* community. We develop our own goals, and try on different roles in grade level and vertical teams, professional learning experiences, and even school governance. I really like that I'm able to experiment with colleagues while encouraging and enacting a learning process I believe in.

In terms of something I would offer to my principal as a suggestion that could help everyone—and I have told her this directly, so I'm not talking behind her back—I find it frustrating when she presents certain initiatives as "non-negotiables." As I said, I've actually told her this, so I don't feel like I'm speaking out of turn. I understand that we live and work in a very high-pressure context as educators today, and that—as the principal—she is especially accountable to outside stakeholders. But still, I feel that a closed approach to school improvement limits our school and our students' potential. I think that if we kind of joined together in exploring more thoughtfully—and critically—what we are doing and what alternatives might also foster change, we could further develop our school's potential and programs even more! I understand, though, that moving away from what we're told to do by the DOE isn't always easy, comfortable, or possible—especially today. Still, I think we could get there.

GERRY'S REFLECTIONS

My principal is very helpful to me in her feedback—she's very clear. She always tells me exactly what I need to do, which takes a lot of guesswork out of things, you know? That helps me a lot. In our school there are rules and policies so none of us can say that we don't understand what to do. I like that. It helps me understand what I need to do and how I need to do it. She also helps me after observations because—when she gives me feedback—she tells me what I did right and what I did wrong. She always recognizes my hard work and offers clear directions about what I need to do next. When I get something wrong—like not asking students

continues

enough higher-order questions—she gives me charts from books, based on research, to help me learn what to say, and that really helps. I know what to do to get it right. That's very helpful. Plus, when she gives me feedback, she explains the steps and then she directs me to more resources and tools I can use. Sometimes she even tells me to go to someone on my team who, say, is better at classroom management than I am. Plus, every policy is written out for us in our faculty handbook. That's really good.

And it's not just that. If I have a question or need help with something, she usually has a clear answer, too. She's very objective in terms of her feedback, and I feel like she holds all of the teachers to a fair and equal standard. I've worked in some places where different people seem to play by different rules, and that honestly drives me crazy. It makes me feel like people play "favorites" in ways that undermine what we're all trying to do. It was a big relief for me when I started here that my principal wasn't like that. She's quite fair, and very straightforward.

The one thing that I'm confused about in terms of her feedback is that she sometimes asks me to consider different options for my teaching. Like, do I think this or that would be more effective? It's a little frustrating for me when she asks questions like that after observations, because it sort of leaves me in limbo about what to do next. I already know what I'm thinking, so why can't she just tell me what she needs me to do to get it right? I'm completely committed to my students and my work—I want my job to be in education for many years. I just wish that she would focus on what I need to do for my annual evaluation. That's what would really help me.

NOEL'S REFLECTIONS

My principal gives very effective feedback because she encourages me, and everyone at school, to think for ourselves. We learn a lot from each other—and I truly feel that is essential. I've had other principals who didn't do this; they just wanted me to follow their rules and do whatever they want. I understand that needs to happen sometimes when you're rolling out a new policy or gathering data on a new initiative. But not in all situations—especially with all the mandates from our district right now. I also really appreciate that my principal makes room for us to discuss my teaching thoughtfully after observations. She asks me what I personally think about the lessons she observes, and invites me to share my thinking before offering hers. And during evaluations and goal setting meetings, I can pick my own goals—things I really care about and want to get better at. And I tell her. I mean, I feel I can be honest with her. That means a lot to me. I know what I do well, and what I still need to work on. I also know what she's really good at, and what she might be able to improve. Despite our frequent back-and-forth, I'd say our relationship is one of mutual respect—and I think she would too. She trusts me as a competent professional and respects my decisions about her feedback—even when I don't always do what she suggests. And I really do appreciate her feedback, even if she might not always know that. I think that, mostly, she knows that. On another note, my principal doesn't need or want me to check in with her about every instructional choice I make in my classroom or with my team. *That* is very helpful, too.

The part that is hardest for me is that she doesn't always take my advice or feedback when I offer it to her with best intentions. Like the time when a bunch of teachers in a recent grade-level team meeting were upset about the changes she was making to our weekly meeting policy. Some of the teachers—including me—preferred the old system and just didn't understand her reasoning. I told her about that and how I thought she could help. At my school, in my team, and in my life, I question things. Just because she's the principal, and just because she's in an official leadership position, I'm not going to stop that. I'm not going to take something as truth just because she says so. I guess that's something that I find unhelpful.

do more for her, and it gives me the courage to try new things to be an even better teacher."

In many ways, Taylor's reflections evince a similarly relational orientation. However, Taylor's meaning making suggests a more self-transforming perspective on feedback and collaboration. It is, for instance, "the fluidity and mutuality" of Taylor's conversations with the principal that feel most supportive (i.e., not just her approval). In addition, Taylor clearly communicates an openness to learning and growing from others' perspectives (e.g., "[I]t's incredibly helpful to consider my practice from her [the principal's] perspective. I obviously can't do that alone"). Like many self-transforming knowers, Taylor also finds it challenging to accept "non-negotiables" at face value, and yearns for greater opportunity to "join together" and explore the deeper complexities of such mandates.

In the third vignette, Gerry's reflections are more indicative of an instrumental way of knowing. For instance, Gerry's preferences for "rules and policies," "right" and "wrong" answers, evidence-based suggestions, and a single standard for "fairness" reflect a concrete, dualistic orientation to the work at hand. Unlike Taylor, then, Gerry *prefers* when the principal "just tell[s] me what she needs me to do to get it right." Like other instrumental knowers, Gerry finds exploring different options and alternatives (each of which may be "right" in one form or another) disorienting, and a little bit like being "in limbo."

Finally, Noel's reflections suggest a strong appreciation of autonomy, and a self-authoring perspective on teaching, authority, and feedback. More specifically, Noel demonstrates an internal capacity for self-reflection and awareness (e.g., "I know what I do well, and what I still need to work on"). In addition, Noel expressly appreciates opportunities to direct goal-setting conversations and share internal assessments with others—even those in authority (e.g., "Just because she's the principal, and just because

she's in an official leadership position, I'm not going to stop that"). Yet Noel still finds it challenging when others don't share the same assessments, ideas, or points of view, and may need support to take a larger perspective on these internal values and judgments over time. For example, Noel has a hard time understanding when the principal—despite their “mutual respect”—“doesn't always take my advice or feedback when I offer it to her with best intentions.”

IS RESISTANCE ALWAYS RESISTANCE? A DEVELOPMENTAL REFRAMING ON A COMMON CHALLENGE

As all of these examples show, it is vital to understand the kinds of developmental supports and stretching that adults will need to best hear, take in, and act upon your feedback. It is equally important to recognize that when feedback is *not* offered in the confines of a safe holding environment or in ways that meet people where they are developmentally, it can fall quite flat. This is another reason why a working knowledge of the developmental aspects of feedback for growth is so needed and promising. Indeed, because of the frequent (if unintentional) developmental misalignments that can occur in almost any group, team, or relationship, it can sometimes seem to feedback givers that colleagues are being resistant, when in fact they may have misheard, misunderstood, or not heard at all what was being shared in the first place. In these cases, the gap between how feedback is offered and how others receive it can feel almost like a language barrier or, to return to an earlier analogy, a staticky radio signal. As one New York City principal recently characterized it, when this happens it is much like a “misfire in the messaging”—albeit one we can actively work to correct.

Put another way, in our roles as feedback givers, we may sometimes wonder why people are not acting on the *really good* feedback we provided. Understanding the potential developmental dimensions of resistance can help, as another leader put it, make perceived pushback “less ‘ouchy’ and personal.”² Accordingly, when we encourage people to do things or entertain new perspectives as part of our feedback, we must carefully consider the developmental *fit* between their strengths and capacities and what we are asking them to do. We must also be intentional about the supports and challenges we offer to colleagues as they work to demonstrate new skills and abilities, as simply telling individuals what is needed or required is not always enough. Is the person ready, for instance, to develop and reflect on goals for practice (knowing that “reflect” can mean different things to different people)? Will he need carefully tailored supports to implement a

new initiative or take on a leadership role, or is this something that would already feel comfortable and rewarding? Does she agree with your assessments and suggestions? Understanding the developmental landscape—for both ourselves and others—can help us better build the human capacity that will enable us to meet and exceed the mounting demands of teaching and leading today.

Educators' Reflections on Reframing Resistance

While there are inarguably many reasons for and forms of resistance, educators nevertheless often wonder and worry about adults who do not seem to be keeping pace with their feedback. In our work with educational leaders of all kinds, for instance, many voice concerns about “dealing with difficult people,” “understanding why people act the way they do,” or managing adults who are “skeptical and critical.” As we have discussed, however, understanding the developmental roots of some kinds of resistance can be empowering and liberating—for both feedback givers and receivers. It can, for instance, help us to offer feedback with more empathy, compassion, and insight into others' sense making. As many educators have similarly expressed after learning more about constructive-developmental theory and related practices, developmental mindfulness can help us lead and offer feedback more effectively when things (and people) are not changing as fast as we might otherwise like.

For example, after learning about ways of knowing in a professional workshop, Brendan, a leader at an urban middle school, described an important “a-ha” moment. “Now I understand why some of my teachers can't understand my feedback,” he shared excitedly. As part of his school's efforts to improve test scores and find its way out of struggling status, Brendan had been encouraging his teachers to use more high-level questions as indicated in Bloom's taxonomy. Some, however, still weren't doing it. Realizing through his learning in the workshop, though, that some of his teachers were likely making meaning with an instrumental way of knowing, he decided to offer these colleagues more concrete examples and models of practice to scaffold the transition and help them improve their instructional practice.

Another leader from this same school offered a parallel insight about providing feedback to teachers with a socializing way of knowing. While this leader identified as self-authoring in her own way of knowing and tended to offer colleagues what she described as “direct and crisp written feedback,” learning about ways of knowing helped her to understand that many socializing teachers likely couldn't hear her fully when she offered

feedback only in this way. It wasn't necessarily that these adults were resisting her feedback, as she initially thought, but that perhaps they felt overwhelmed or threatened by it. More specifically, referencing the "glow" and "grow" comments she outlined in the written feedback forms (i.e., positive and critical remarks for improved practice), this leader wisely concluded that shifting the order of her comments to focus first on the positive, as well as finding more sincere "glows" to share up front, could help her socializing colleagues better learn from and take in the feedback she was offering.

CHAPTER SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As these examples and this chapter make clear, understanding constructive-developmental theory has important implications for the kinds of feedback colleagues can best hear, understand, take in, and act upon. As we have also begun to explore, adult developmental theory can help us better recognize and deepen the ways in which we ourselves orient to feedback, both as givers and receivers. In chapter 5, we will further consider how these ideas offer insight into why we and others *offer* feedback in the ways that we do, in terms of the gifts we bring as well as the challenges we face—and how we can continue to grow ourselves and our feedback.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

Please take a moment to consider the following questions, which can be used for independent reflection and group conversation. You may find it useful to reflect in writing privately first, and then to engage in discussion with a colleague or team. These questions are intended to help you and your colleagues consider the ideas discussed in this chapter and how they might deepen your understanding about ways of knowing and receiving feedback.

- ◆ After reading this chapter, what are two ways you will use what you have learned to enhance your practice of giving feedback so that others can best hear it or take it in?
- ◆ At this point, what would you name as your most important improvement goal—something you feel you need to get better at—to make your professional feedback more accessible to and actionable for others?

- ◆ What insights do you have about your own way of knowing or growing edge, especially as they relate to receiving feedback? What would feel like a good feedback holding environment for you?
- ◆ With your growth opportunities for giving and receiving feedback in mind, what small steps might help you work toward these goals? How might you collaborate with colleagues to achieve them?