



## Navigating by Feedback

### What Leaders and Moths Have in Common

By Debra Loftus, Ph.D.

**The Scene.** This particular scene has played out in various client sessions a striking number of times lately. It goes something like this:

*Client:* "I'm really confused and frustrated."

*Me:* "Tell me more."

*Client:* "Well, you know how I've been working on (insert target behavior of your choice here: being a better listener in

conversations/adding more strategic input to leadership team meetings/getting less involved in my direct reports' day-to-day decision making/etc.)?"

*Me:* "Yes, I do. And you've been making good progress on that."

*Client:* "Yeah, well, I really got blind-sided recently when (insert influential feedback source of your choice here: my boss/my boss's boss/some of my direct reports/an

influential peer/etc.) asked to give me some feedback. What I heard is that I need to make the exact opposite change from what I've been working so hard to do! Now I'm being told that I need to be (insert opposite target behavior of your choice here: provide more active leadership and be less quiet in conversations/show more of an execution bias in leadership team meetings/come in closer on some of my direct reports)!"

Emotional pause.

*Client:* "I mean, what gives? Am I supposed to do more or less of these things then? How am I supposed to navigate through the right changes to make when the feedback I'm getting could take me one direction at one point in time and then the exact opposite direction at another?"

Great question. A dilemma for both developing leaders...and moths.

**Moth-ology.** I don't know very much about moths. Like most of you, I would guess, I am occasionally startled when one shows up by a night-time light source I'm using. They always seem to be crazily jerking from one flight path to another around said light source, which in turn induces the "moth dance" in me as I try to dodge the unpredictable movements of that winged creature.

Yet I recently learned something surprising about how moths navigate. And the richness of the metaphor it provides for what we humans do is striking to me.

## **How am I supposed to navigate through the right changes to make when the feedback I'm getting could take me one direction at one point in time and then the exact opposite direction at another?**

It turns out that moths fly straight when they have a bright celestial light source by which to guide themselves (e.g. the sun, the moon). Some entomologists hypothesize that by using an innate capacity called transverse orientation, moths navigate by flying at a constant angle to that more distal, natural light. When guiding themselves by a proximal, man-made light source, however, the angle of the light source changes as they fly by it, thereby confusing them.

Additionally, given the differential in transitory levels of brightness, moths might find a bright light bulb more compelling than the moon at times. But when they get near the bulb, they can't navigate properly and end up flying in circles. Or worse, they completely lose their sense of orientation and get so close to the bulb that they fry themselves.

Brings a whole new meaning to the term "blinded by the light."

**Person-ology.** So what does this have to do with the feedback situation I described in the opening scene?

Like all organisms living in a dynamic environment, human beings need to orient themselves relative to other objects in their environment. We all adapt strategies to accomplish that orienting and to try to reach our desired destinations.

Moths use the brightness of a light source to calculate their position relative to that light source. Human beings use feedback from, and calculations of position relative to, various "light sources" as well. Our light sources include relationships of meaning and perceived importance to our success. Like the moth, the feedback we receive from those sources allows us to calculate our position in our relationships to them (e.g. "he thinks well of my listening skills," "she feels I need to do a better job of leading my direct reports"), as well as to determine our overall distance from our desired destination (or goals).

We need that feedback to orient ourselves in interpersonal space, for sure; however, also like moths, we can sometimes lose our way. That's where the metaphor has a deeper resonance for us all. That's where the nature of the light source - "celestial" or "man-made" - comes into play.

**Feedback-ology.** Feedback, while valuable, is inherently limited as an input by which to guide ourselves longer term. While the aphorism "perception is reality" is common in the feedback business, it needs to be qualified.

True, feedback provides data, but it only portrays a certain time-bound representation of "reality" – namely, the reality, or [story](#), of the person(s) supplying it to you.

Also, feedback is inescapably man-made. As such, it is subject to the degree of craftsmanship of the person delivering it (e.g. their accuracy of sight, their skill in assembling it, the care with which they polish it). Some feedback is better crafted, more useful, than others. That is true regardless of whether the feedback is positive or negative.

**Light-ology.** So one of the skills to master as we try to fly by the transitory light of feedback is to enjoy the utility it might give, but to avoid being seduced away from our desired path - the path that is better navigated with the help of celestial light.

So what should sit in the place of the celestial light, the natural light source by which we should strive to navigate our longer-term journey, in this extended metaphor? Our underlying sense of purpose as leaders and as human beings, the ultimate goal behind all that flying.

I'm certainly not the first to suggest that. Thanks to ground-breaking work by leadership thinkers ranging from Stephen Covey to Jim Collins, a clear sense of

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purpose is now commonly thought to be important to effective leadership. Yet many leaders of today still lack a clear sense of purpose. A 2014 Harvard Business Review [article on this subject](#) reported that fewer than 20% of leaders studied had a strong sense of their individual purpose – and even fewer could articulate it.

Navigating consistently by your deeper sense of purpose may not only help you be a better leader, it may even extend your life.

Just like those moths who stay on course (rather than crash and burn) through celestial-light navigation, a large-scale [research study](#) published in the journal Psychological Science found that, “greater purpose in life consistently predicted lower mortality risk across the lifespan, showing the same benefit for younger, middle-aged, and older participants across the follow-up period.”

In other words, it’s never too late to learn how to fly straight.

## Purpose-ology.

The HBR article I mentioned earlier contains a description of one useful approach.

In my coaching practice, I’ve employed a number of techniques to help my clients discover and/or give voice to their

Myriad methods for helping you develop a stronger sense of your individual purpose exist.

underlying sense of purpose. One favorite is an adaptation of Jim Collins’ Hedgehog Concept from his book, [Good to Great](#). (You can find useful videos of Jim speaking about the personal application of that organizational model [here](#).)

Briefly, the idea is to spend time reflecting upon and gathering experiential data about how you would populate the three circles represented in this Venn diagram:



Then, most importantly, your work is to find a meaningful yet succinct way to describe the “Sweet Spot,” the place where all three circles meet for you. Finding a simple yet profound way to capture that sweet spot may require “brutal truth telling,” to ourselves and others, as Jim Collins has suggested. And operating from it to make

day-to-day decisions and set (or re-set) our path of action requires diligence and discipline.

## Conclusion-ology.

Now, it may have occurred to some of you that the type of feedback I described in the opening scenario is indicative of dynamics of the change process itself. Namely, as we make a change in a long-standing behavioral pattern, we may go through a period of over-correcting into the opposite set of behaviors, thus justifying feedback to us about it. For example, if we decide to get better at delegating work to others, we may over-correct into delegating too much (or not the right kinds of) work while we experiment with our new behaviors. It happens.

However, I'm speaking less about the validity of the feedback we receive as we go about our acts of leadership and living...and more about the impact we allow it to have on us. Feedback from others should have some impact, for sure; it can guide us temporarily. We may circle the bulb once or twice and enjoy the warmth. But it should not delay us from our journey toward our desired destination for very long.

Here is where one last finding from my dip into the literature on moth navigation bears repeating: fewer moths appear to take detours toward artificial lights on well moonlit nights. So by "amping up the wattage" of your sense of purpose, you too can avoid unnecessary detours.

Happy flying!



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