# 10 fatal feedback mistakes that kill team culture

&

# 10 simple steps to get back on track and crush your next quarter

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**THIS BOOK HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR PDF READING.**

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# My relationship with feedback

I grew up in a small rural town in outback Australia. It had those stereotypical red dirt roads and yellow signs warning of kangaroos skipping nearby. Each year, there were around 10-20 kids in my grade at school. Unfortunately for me, none of them really liked me. Exclusion was par for the course.

Then at the age of 18, I moved to Sydney to study at university. I moved into a residential college, and all of a sudden there were 104 other teenagers just like me. I went from having no friends to having a bunch of mates who loved the fact that I was this quirky, dedicated yet extroverted nerd.

There was this one guy called Dan, who I met through a friend staying at college. He had big googly eyes and a permanent smile. He was always happy. He turned up to every dinner, drinks or coffee you organised - even though my birthday was right in the middle of exam period each year. And he never said a bad word about anyone.

When we were 21, Dan fell from his parent's balcony in North Sydney, to his death. He was the best of us. And he went first. And I never told him what an awesome human being he was, how he was such a beacon of positivity and how much I valued that. From that day on, I decided to never let the discomfort of a situation stop me from telling someone why I liked them.

That's when my love for positive, unprompted feedback started to flourish: In under 30 seconds I could put a smile on someone's face by saying something positive about them or something positive they did. I just had to overcome that initial awkwardness. We think about power as being the ability to order others around. But we all also have the power to make someone else's day by simply saying "hey, I think you're a really good teacher".

From those early days playing on farms as a kid, to studying Mathematics at university, to working for Goldman Sachs and then J.P. Morgan, to now running a software company called Howamigoing, I've seen the good, the bad and the downright ugly side of feedback. I've seen it put tears in someone's eyes one day and a spring in their step the next.

So why does feedback take us on such an emotional rollercoaster? Why do so many people tell me how it once changed their life but now they don't bother with it? I've gone about as far down the rabbit hole as you can go when it comes to this question because there are just too many people in the world missing out on having amazing relationships (at work and at home) to let it go unanswered. In going down this rabbit hole, it was hard to find a simple, practical, science-backed guide.

So I wrote this short little book. It's written for managers and team leaders who care about their people and who believe that better feedback practices can bring better business outcomes.

Enjoy!

# What to expect from this book

At one point, this book stood at 337 pages – that's how passionate I am about this subject! But I decided that anything over 50 A4 pages would be counterproductive to you, the reader. I decided that if I can't clearly communicate the foundations of a great team feedback culture in under 50 pages, then maybe I don't get it yet, and the message probably won't stick, and this book won't be of practical value.

I'm a big believer in the power of simplicity. Particularly in the 21st Century when there's so much information freely available, I believe that the most useful resources are short, insightful, practical and shareable. So while this book is based on research, it's not an academic piece of writing. Instead, it's a simple, plain English guide on how to instantly improve your team's feedback culture. Starting now.

Over the past five years, I've sifted through hundreds of articles and academic papers on employee performance, engagement, and motivation. I then took the most practical recommendations that are backed by science and tested them out with my own team and

many of my clients' teams. This process of experimentation and validation has been incredibly useful in bridging the gap between empirical data and commercial realities.

Why focus on teams? Because no matter how big the business, the team is the unit of change. Team performance is the building block of company performance — when teams get it right, business results will follow. Yes, some teams may need to work with each other on occasion. But that's just another, slightly bigger team working toward a slightly bigger goal. And besides, it's easier to start improving things within teams than it is to launch a company-wide initiative.

# Your feedback culture is your edge

# Performance "Management"

I shudder when I hear the phrase "Performance Management". It divides the team into Us (the managers) and Them (the ones who would not perform well without us). But more importantly, it implies that you can control a team member's performance. You can't. You can control only a few things in life: your thoughts (to a degree), your words and your actions.

You can influence other people's performance, but not control. So let's use the phrase Performance Enablement or Performance Guidance. It might not sound like a big difference, but *words do matter*. Few people like to be managed. Most people like to be inspired.

# Culture = communication

There are so many definitions of team culture online. So many! Most of them leave you feeling nice and fuzzy but aren't helpful (e.g. "the air you breathe").

This is the simplest and most helpful definition of culture that I have come across: *Your culture is how your team work together.*

Nothing more, nothing less.

But, the biggest factor in how your team work together is how your team *communicate* with each other - it's the verbal and non-verbal interactions between team members that get remembered. Why? Because while we may judge ourselves by our intentions, others judge us by our words and our actions. Without mind-reading abilities, that's all they have to go by. Your team's communication isn't part of its culture, *it is its culture*.

## Culture creates competitiveness

It's relatively easy for someone else to reproduce your unique product or service, even if you have IP rights or trademarks. And someone else probably will, if they haven't already. No market is static. But your team's response to these situations, and therefore your long-term survival, comes down to your culture. Your team's competitiveness comes down to your culture. *Your team's competitiveness comes down to your communication.*

## It's all about agile cultures

Every team wants to be more agile and move faster. But faster in which direction? Moving faster in the wrong direction will

eventually destroy a team. Moving faster in the right direction but in an inefficient way will eventually destroy morale – reducing productivity, lowering margins and killing competitiveness.

A lot of people confuse moving faster with working harder. The smart way to move faster is to *learn faster*. And learning faster when it comes to team performance means gathering *better feedback more often* so you can *course-correct sooner*.

## Feedback creates agility

More feedback encourages more conversation, which leads to more regular course-correction. This allows teams to move faster in the right direction. Less feedback means people operate in mental silos. Everyone is busy, but doing what? Are people spending their time on what really matters?

Taking time at the end of each month to pause, reflect and gather feedback from your team might seem like a distraction. It might seem like you're slowing down even. But with more rapid course-correction, you'll find that this allows you to move faster over time. Regular, quality feedback is key to an agile team culture.
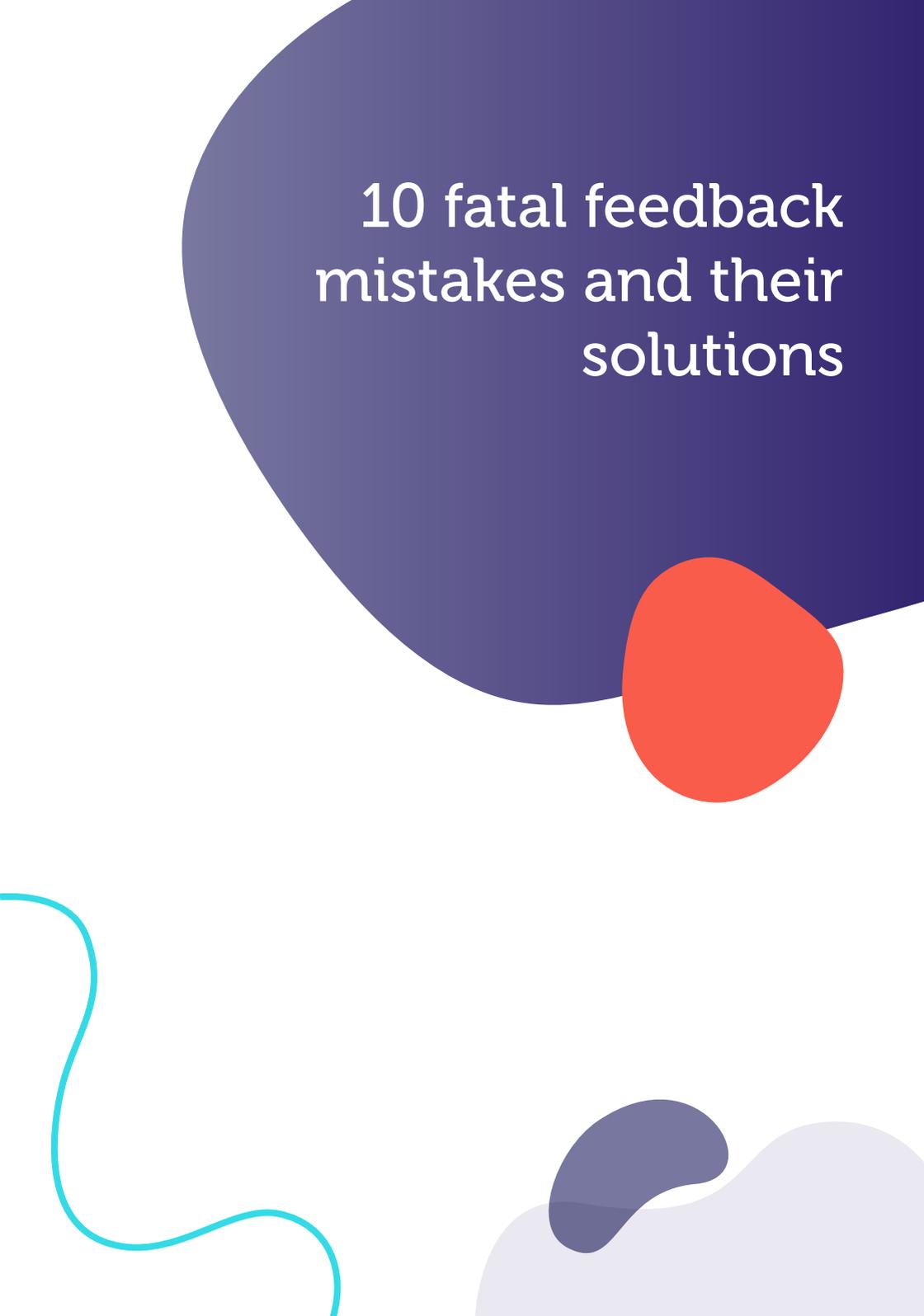
# 10 fatal feedback mistakes and their solutions

# 1. New staff get minimal feedback during probation

## Why is this a problem?

You've just spent £4,000 on recruiter fees hiring Charlie. Charlie went through five arduous rounds of interviews, including meeting the founder, CEO and even Joe the EA who "has a sixth sense for reading people". And despite putting him through the wringer, Charlie accepted your job over a competitor. Wunderbar!

You might feel that a rigorous recruitment process means it's *job done* on maintaining your awesome culture. But to put this rigorous interview process into perspective:

1.  you've spent less than 15 hours with Charlie;
2.  most of these hours have not been under real-life working conditions; and
3.  the team will spend 500+ hours working with Charlie in their first three months.

This example illustrates the disproportionate amount of feedback that many companies collect in the interview stage vs the probation stage.

Yes, *hiring slow* is good, but it's much more important to *fire fast*. And not firing fast, i.e. letting poor cultural fits slip through probation, will kill your team's performance faster than you can say deadweight. It'll also kill your profitability, as salaries count for 50-80% of revenues in most businesses.

Keeping deadweight onboard won't immediately sink the boat, but it will slow you down. And the longer you keep deadweight onboard, the less likely you are to out-row your competitors.

## Steps to solve it

Let's assume that Charlie's probation period is six months. Here are two simple feedback processes you should do to quickly identify if he's a bad fit and avoid compounding a poor hiring decision.

### Mid-probation feedback for Charlie

Charlie receives *anonymous feedback* from the *whole team* after three months (aka 360 feedback). This feedback is also visible to Charlie's manager. E.g. the below template.

| Looking back |
| --- |
| What have I done so far that has impressed you? {280 characters} |
| Based on our work together so far, what do you see as my key strength(s)? {280 characters} |
| Can you give an example of where you feel my communication was great? {280 characters} |
| Can you give an example of where you feel my communication could have been better? {280 characters} |
| What have I done, or not done, that might indicate that I'm not adapting to the responsibilities of the role or the culture of the business? {280 characters} |
| **Looking ahead** |
| Based on our work together so far, what would you suggest I work on to make sure I can be as effective as possible? {280 characters} |
| Any other comments or advice for my next few months in the team? {280 characters} |

Why remove names from comments? You need to allow the team to be *open and honest without fear of judgment by others*. To do this, you need to provide *psychological safety*. Many people are not comfortable saying that they think someone else is doing crappy work. What if the boss disagrees? If we think we're in the minority by saying that Charlie shouldn't pass probation, then without anonymity we'll stick with the herd and say "yes, let's keep him", for fear of appearing too critical. We still make so many tribe-like decisions on a daily basis without even realising it.

Why just 280 characters? Because restricting responses to a "tweet-length" forces people to provide *concise, actionable feedback*. It also enhances anonymity by concealing writing styles.

Without this feedback from the *whole team* during the probation period, it's impossible for Charlie to know exactly where he stands and what course-correction is needed.

Sure, Charlie's manager could just have a few casual chats and provide 1:1 feedback to Charlie, but to reduce cognitive bias and minimise subjectivity, anonymous 360 feedback is much more powerful and takes hardly any more effort.

### End of probation feedback for Charlie's manager

Charlie's manager receives *anonymous 360 feedback* from the *whole team* after five months. This feedback arrives at a pass/fail decision and so is not (directly) visible to Charlie, but will be discussed with Charlie. E.g. the below template.

| Looking back |
|---|
| Have you enjoyed working with this person? {Definitely, At times, Not really} |
| Please elaborate on the above. {280 characters} |
| In your opinion, has this person demonstrated the core capabilities required for their role? {Definitely, Perhaps, Not really} |
| Please elaborate on the above. {280 characters} |
| In your opinion, has this person communicated clearly, concisely and proactively with you? {Definitely, At times, Not really} |
| Please elaborate on the above. {280 characters} |
| In your opinion, has this person demonstrated willingness to listen, learn and adapt? {Definitely, At times, Not really} |
| Please elaborate on the above. {280 characters} |
| **Looking ahead** |
| In your opinion, do you think this person can bring something unique to the team and has the capacity to enhance our culture going forward? {Definitely, Maybe, Probably not} |
| Please elaborate on the above. {280 characters} |
| Do you want to keep working with this person? {Definitely, Don't mind, Not really} |
| Please elaborate on the above. {280 characters} |
| If this person was to stay in the business, what would you like to see them do more or less of? {280 characters} |

## Another option

Abandon probation periods altogether. If you need to let go of Charlie in his first six months, then do so, but still pay him one-month's salary in lieu of a notice period just as you would if he

was a regular employee. You might even find that without the stress of having a looming pass/fail date, Charlie might actually perform better. Or he'll perform worse, which is actually better because you find out sooner that he's not a good fit. Either way, make sure that your decision to fire Charlie is based on *quality 360 feedback from everyone he worked with*, not just his manager.

## Magic Feedback

Around five years ago, a team of psychologists from Yale, Columbia and Stanford stumbled upon what they called *Magic Feedback*.

After middle-class students had written an essay, their teacher made notes of their work and said: "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them."

This resulted in a 40% increase in effort and performance for white students and a 320% increase for black students. Interestingly, these 19 words give no hint about how to improve. They just subtly deliver the message that *it's safe to try* and *it's ok to fail*.

So the next time you give feedback, think: should I be *giving advice*, or should I be *giving confidence*?

# 2. People aren't trained on giving feedback

## Why is this a problem?

Consider these three scenarios.

### 1. Team members give no feedback to Charlie

This is usually the default situation because we fear hurting people's feelings, so we bottle stuff up. Then later on, during Charlie's appraisal or salary negotiation, when feedback is mandatory, Charlie is caught by surprise at all the things he hasn't been doing well for nine months and for which nobody has mentioned to him. This not only hurts Charlie's feelings (the reason we didn't speak up nine months ago) but also hurts his confidence and perceived belonging in the team.

### 2. Team members give feedback to Charlie, but poorly

Ever had someone say something like:

- "You have a tendency to…", or
- "You need to be more…", or
- "You're often a bit too…", or
- "I feel like you're…"

For those not trained in giving feedback, this verbal diarrhea is often the go-to. Even for those of us with lots of practice, we still fall back into this trap. I'm certainly guilty.

The problem with feedback like this is that it isn't tied to an action, to something that Charlie said or did. When you only give your subjective opinion and a vague summary of why you feel that way, Charlie has no idea what to do differently next time.

### 3. Team members give feedback to Charlie, often and well

When feedback is clear, respectful and we acknowledge our personal subjectivity, issues are resolved quicker, trust builds faster, and relationships become stronger

But how can team members give regular constructive feedback to Charlie without hurting Charlie's feelings?

## Steps to solve it

Just split your feedback into *Fact* and *Feeling*.

Fact = Charlie's action. What you saw or heard.

Feeling = your subjective conclusion of Charlie's action aka your interpretation of the Fact.

Here are some real-life examples from my team at Howamigoing.

**Tough feedback**

"Hey {name removed}, dropping below some Fact/Feeling feedback for you following that sprint call we just had.

**Fact** - while we were on the video call you were sending messages on Slack, and when I asked for your opinion half-way through, you took a few seconds to respond and asked me to repeat the question.

**Feeling** - I felt like you weren't actively listening on that call because you were typing on Slack. As CEO of a remote team, it's important to me that when we're making time to speak, that we're present. I didn't feel that you were present on that call."

**Nice feedback**

"Hey {name remove}, a little feedback from me below.

**Fact** - last week you created a Howmie [that's what the Howamigong team call ourselves] Developer boot camp doc in Google, then you shared it in Slack for everyone to see, with a long explanation behind it."

**Feeling** - it makes me think you want to be and you will be a great teacher. It makes me feel that you take action from our discussions. Makes me feel proud to have you on the team. Keep up the good work [smiley face emoji]."

**The right time to give proactive feedback**

In general, resist the urge to immediately rush and tell Charlie what you saw and how you felt about it.

For constructive feedback that could cause a fight-or-flight reaction, psychologists recommend sleeping on it and then delivering your thoughts the next day.

Make sure you speak up within 24 hours though so that actions don't slip out of memory. This avoids the conversation turning into a debate on the Facts, rather than how the Facts led to Feelings and how that interplay can be used as a catalyst for personal and relationship growth.

# Olympics vs Offices

"For most professionals - doctors, lawyers, scientists – you go to school, study, graduate, practise and then you make it on your own. Now consider sporting professionals. Until they retire, they surround themselves with a coach. In fact, the best sportspeople in the world typically have the most coaches. And they're the best.*"

Why do us non-sportspeople feel like we don't need regular, tough feedback after a few years in the workplace? Might this contribute to the two-year job-change cycle we get into vs the lifelong dedication to a sport?

We sometimes feel like we're on our own in the workplace and start to manage our professional growth very passively, waiting for others to guide us, waiting for a promotion to decide what to do next.

If you feel like your career has stagnated, consider a coach. They might even give you better life direction in your first meeting than you've had from your last three managers.

*Taken from Atul Gawande's 2017 TED talk, paraphrased slightly

# 3. Feedback is too focused on weaknesses

## Why is this a problem?

There's a growing consensus among behavioural psychologists that *strengths-based feedback* delivers higher employee engagement, motivation and job satisfaction than focusing on someone's *areas for development*.

If you're like me and most other humans, you're really good at some things (*your superpowers*) and not so good at others (*your blind spots*).

If you're like me and most other humans, you'll never be able to turn your blind spots into your superpowers. Maybe you can take a blind spot from below average to *slightly above* average if you focus all your attention on it for twelve months. But all the while you missed out on seeing how far your superpowers would take you. What a wasted year, turning a unique person into an average one.

Unfortunately, this is how most employee performance reviews are structured: 90% of the conversation focuses on Charlie's areas for development rather than his strengths for amplification.

Why? Because most managers are insecure in their position. They fear that by telling Charlie he's great, Charlie will soon lose respect/admiration for their decreasingly-more-knowledgeable superior. So they use feedback as a stick to ensure lower-ranking staff know their place in the office.

## Steps to solve it

Now, it's essential to be aware of our blind spots. In fact, a great team exercise in self awareness is to have everyone fill out their own personal *Baseball Card*, writing down what they believe are their strengths and weaknesses, and debating them with the person in the team that they know the best.

But when it comes to getting the best out of Charlie on an ongoing basis, make sure that the majority of backward-looking feedback is focused on wins. Flag just one miss and focus on discussing the learning that resulted from it. Avoid saying *what would you have done differently?* as this just leads to endless rumination and what-ifs. Instead, say *you did what you believed was best at the time with the information you had, so what are the lessons for next time?* It's a subtle but powerful mindset shift from *regret* to *acceptance and growth*.

Try the below strengths-based feedback template. These questions work well in a one-to-one chat or collected anonymously from the whole team in a 360 format.

**Question 1**

"What did I do in the past few months that you really liked?"

**Question 2**

"What's one thing I did in the past few months that you didn't like? Why?"

**Question 3**

"What one thing do you think I should focus on for the next few months to amplify my strengths and help the team more?"

## Quiet Time

At Howamigoing, we prohibit internal messages or emails from 9 am to midday. Only urgent phone calls. We call this *Quiet Time*.

Why? Because multitasking, i.e. working and responding to messages at the same time, severely reduces productivity. Except for simple subconscious tasks like walking the dog and talking to a friend, our brain isn't designed to do two things at once. And like moving between utility providers, there's a cost of switching.

NASA showed that when switching between two tasks vs doing one to completion and moving onto the next, this happens:
1) It takes longer to do each individual task
2) We perform worse on each task
3) We perform worse in subsequent tasks

In 2010, Harvard researchers regularly messaged 2,200 people asking *what are you doing right now* and *how are you feeling*. "Whatever people were doing, whether it was having sex or reading or shopping, they tended to be happier if they were focused on a single activity instead of thinking about something else."

# 4. No means to give anonymous feedback to others

## Why is this a problem?

We have this tiny almond-sized thing near our brain stem called *the amygdala*. It controls *fight-or-flight* and helps us survive. But while survival is no longer a daily concern for most people (thankfully), our amygdala doesn't know that. It can't tell the difference between seeing a saber-tooth tiger and having to tell a colleague they're doing crappy work. It just thinks: *This situation is distressing and could end badly*. So then our heart rate goes up and blood goes out of our head and into our limbs. We become dumb and ready to rumble or ready to run.

For Charlie, the thought of speaking up about a colleague's work or a company initiative can trigger fight-or-flight. What if his boss disagrees? It could end with him being ostracised - the emotional equivalent of being *kicked out of the tribe*. So most people don't speak up and lots of culture-killing activity goes on unchecked. Good junior staff leave and poor performing senior (expensive) staff stick around. Before long, productivity starts declining and margins begin shrinking.

## Steps to solve it

For Charlie to feel comfortable being open and honest about what he thinks isn't working, he needs to feel *psychologically safe*. The way to achieve this in the workplace is through anonymity. In practice, you can do this with just two simple feedback events each quarter.

### Employee centric

Charlie asks three or more team members of his choosing:

1. What did I do recently that helped you get results?
2. What did I do that blocked you from being as efficient and effective as you could have been?

### Team centric

Team leaders ask everyone in the team:

1. What did we do really well as a team this quarter?
2. How can we work better together next quarter?

For those giving feedback, remove their names from their comments and restrict responses to two or three lines. This ensures that feedback is concise, actionable and can be given without repercussions to someone's role or status.

Note: The feedback needs to be *genuinely anonymous*, without any tampering from HR or management. Why? Because although our amygdala might seem dumb, it's actually pretty smart. If Charlie senses that he can't trust the system, that what he says might come back to hurt his promotion or pay rise or workplace relationships, then psychological safety is lost. Fearing repercussions, Charlie will water-down his feedback and resort to being needlessly positive. The process will be considered a waste of time by all staff, making management look silly.

# Tim vs Henry

"Tim was my manager. I was six months into my first job out of university. Under Tim, I'd just worked 48 days straight without a day off. Never home before 11 pm. On day 49, I ran out of puff. At midnight I told Tim I wanted to go home. He said 'I'm incredibly disappointed with this attitude only six months into the role' and 'I can't force you to stay but if you leave the office it'll probably cost you your job.' I sat at my desk staring at the wooden cubicle panels for five minutes. Then I left. I called in sick the next day...citing gastro and spent the morning contacting recruiters.

"On day 50, Henry called me into a meeting room. Henry was Tim's manager. I braced. 'So first things first. I want to tell you that you're doing a fantastic job. You've impressed a lot of people around here in your first six months already. Your work is top quality and the last thing we can afford is for you to burn out and for us to lose you. So please, take the rest of the week off, relax, catch up with friends. Hopefully by Monday that gastro has cleared up.' he said, with a cheeky smile.

"That cheeky smile and those words carried me through two-and-a-half more years, including a promotion twelve months

later. Henry turned me from a failure into a fan of the firm. He remains a friend to this day. I have no idea if he was telling the truth about my work. It didn't matter then and it doesn't matter now. That's the power of positive feedback."

# 5. No forum for publicly praising others' work

## Why is this a problem?

I'm yet to find someone who feels over thanked. But I can easily find 100 people who feel underappreciated. Which is strange, because praise costs nothing to give but is invaluable to receive. Especially when it's public.

It can be nice to reward the team with:

- Free lunch on Mondays; or
- Discounted gym membership; or
- A weekend retreat.

But there's nothing quite like someone personally and proactively thanking you for your individual contributions. That ten seconds you carve out to give Charlie some public praise may well be the best return on investment you make that day.

On the other hand, an extended period without having our work recognised can create uncertainty and anxiety. Lack of recognition

can cause Charlie, a hard-working and high-performing team member, to consider an internal move because he feels insecure.

## Steps to solve it

There is almost always a reason to give recognition daily. Even more powerful is saying thanks to Charlie in front of clients or other third parties. The key is to introduce regular public recognition as a habit within the team. Try these two simple actions.

### Option 1 - Internal messenger

If you run on Slack or another internal messaging service, create a #goodvibes or #praise or #thanks channel where *everyone can publicly recognise teammates* in real-time when they have contributed in a specific way.

### Option 2 - Email

If you run on email, send a *Friday shout-out*, recognising one thing that each person did that week. You'll need to lead from the front on this one, creating social proof that giving regular praise is a simple but highly valuable practice for improving performance.

**One more thing!**

Make sure that praise is specific. Saying only "thanks for the hard work!" is lazy and disingenuous. The only behaviour it positively reinforces is working hard. Instead, try "thanks for staying until 8 pm the last three nights to improve Section 6 of the report, it wasn't expected, but very much appreciated!"

## Mum vs Dad

"I took up golf when I was 13. Man, I got hooked. I got the bug really bad. I'd play 18 holes with mum and she'd say 'you have such a beautiful swing.' That gave me a lot of confidence. Then I'd play 18 holes with dad and he'd say 'your swing needs a lot of work.' That worried me a bit because I'd been working really hard on it."

Who was right? They both were. That's the funny thing about feedback. It's pretty much all biased, so its value to you depends on which parts you want to believe. It's up to you to decide whether you're fine just as you are, or whether you can and want to push yourself to the next level. At the end of the day, the only person you have to satisfy is yourself.

# 6. Using Word/Excel/Docs for performance feedback

## Why is this a problem?

Google Docs, Google Sheets, Microsoft Word or Excel are perfect for simple exchanges of information between a few people.

But once you have ten or more people in your business, they are not the right medium for managing feedback processes.

**Here are four reasons why:**

1. It's an administrative nightmare sharing a feedback document, chasing people up, aggregating responses, saving/ filing documents and then finally sharing feedback with the right people at the right time.

2. Because this process is manual and painful, companies only do it once or twice per year. This is far too infrequent for regular performance course-correction.

3. Given the top-down initiation of this process, there's little incentive for Charlie to be proactive and gather ad-hoc feedback.

4. It's nearly impossible for Charlie to respond anonymously, which means he is less honest and feedback is less useful. See Mistake #4.

## Steps to solve it

There are now a few tools designed specifically to help companies automate their performance feedback processes. Of course, I'm biased, but I do believe that Howamigoing is the best tool available.

Firstly, it's just *really easy to use*. It looks and feels like Pinterest or Tumblr, but it's *technically* an HR tool. We believe beautiful design is not a nice to have, but a need to have. Humans are visual animals, that's why art is a thing. Our eyes and brains judge things faster than we can find the words to justify why.

Secondly, it's made with the employee in mind, meaning:
1. It provides *psychological safety* with *partial anonymity for 360 feedback processes*;
2. It encourages *better feedback habits* through best-practice templates developed with leading behavioural psychologists
3. People can gather feedback from who they want, when they want, on what they want - and they can publicly recognise someone else's actions with the click of a button

Thirdly, it's one of the few anonymous feedback and public praise platforms that are available on an entirely self-service, Freemium basis. No need for lengthy and complex onboarding processes.

In late 2019, Metro Bank using Howamigoing to do a three-week strengths-based 360 feedback cycle across two branches in West London. After reading their feedback, 57% of branch staff said they felt more confident and 57% said they felt more valued (that's not a typo!). Not one person said they felt less confident or less valued.

What would it mean for half of your team to all of a sudden feel more confident and valued?

# La La Land

Every day the same film is watched by thousands of people around the world. They watch the same actors say the same lines while eating the same popcorn in the same cinema. Yet they come out with wildly different opinions of the movie.

Just ask twenty people what they thought of La La Land. Some say "it was great!" Some say "it was ok." Many people hated it.

The thing is, we all see the world through our own unique lens. We all have a different vocabulary and so we all describe the same event in different ways. Which means that when it comes to feedback, to describing another person's past actions and what we thought of it, it's all subjective. And that's ok.

So pause for a second and think: Was Jen rude in that last meeting? Or pushy? Or direct? Or was she actually brave for speaking up in a room full of males? Take time to understand the subjectivity behind your opinions.

# 7. One-to-one catch-ups are not held consistently

## Why is this a problem?

Humans are tribe animals. Yes, we've become a little more sophisticated the past few hundred years, but we crave connection just as much as our less-evolved ancestors. We are more willing to give 100% effort and go into battle when we feel connected to the leader of the tribe.

When one-to-ones get skipped, we feel disconnected and lost. A small concern or frustration can turn into a complete team breakdown. Sometimes the damage is too hard to overturn and Charlie just ends up quitting.

Team performance is driven one person at a time, by leaders that listen to and help develop those in their team.

## Steps to solve it

One-to-ones only need to be twenty minutes long and only need to happen every three weeks.

Use one-to-ones to understand how you're helping and how you're blocking Charlie. Don't use them to distribute more work – there's enough time in the week for that already. It's worth repeating this – 1:1s are the time for team leaders to ask questions, not in an interrogatory way but in a *let me understand your situation better so I can help* kind of way.

For Charlie to be honest and open up, team leaders must open with vulnerability, genuinely asking for feedback and genuinely wanting to learn. Here are my favourite questions for a team leader to ask during a 1:1:

1. What have I done recently that motivated you or helped you get results?*
2. What have I done recently that demotivated you or blocked you from getting results?*
3. What have you noticed lately about the state of my wellbeing?*
4. What's been working really well for you since we last spoke?
5. What's been challenging for you since we last spoke?
6. What have been your main learnings since we last spoke?
7. At what point in the future do you see your learning and growth plateauing?

8. What's something that you've seen other teams or businesses do well, that we could think about trying?

*For questions one to three, you may struggle to get honest answers in person as some people struggle with this level of directness face-to-face. That was my experience, so I started using these questions as part of an anonymous 360 to the team every two months.

Having team leaders ask these questions each month will increase team performance much more than a pulse survey that asks employees "on a scale of 1-10 how likely are you to recommend {our company} to a friend or family member." I love my company and I love my family, but I wouldn't recommend that mum comes to work with me.

**Let's talk about pulse surveys**
Because one-to-ones take up time, many managers choose to skip them and rely on data from pulse surveys to understand what people think. Do a pulse survey, everyone feels heard, employee engagement increases, the business is now officially a great place to work and performance goes through the roof. Right? Not quite.

Pulse surveys are like visiting the doctor. Charlie will get a diagnosis but he won't immediately get better. What makes Charlie better is the work he puts in afterward to improve his diet, physical fitness, and mental resilience. If pulse surveys are the GP visit, feedback and goals are Charlie's fitness regime.

Pulse surveys are great for giving everyone a voice and quickly identifying what's not working. But they don't improve Charlie's performance.

Below is the pulse survey template I use each month with my team. The important thing to note is that it's quick and most questions are Yes/No - to make it easy for the team to answer and to make it easy for me to diagnose any cracks that might be opening up. The final qualitative answer is powerful in guiding me on how to fill any cracks.

| Individual progress in the last 30 days |
|---|
| Did you grow your knowledge base or skill set as a result of your work? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point feel proud of your work? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point speak positively about the team or business to anyone? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point feel challenged in your role? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point feel motivated to improve? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point feel overworked? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point feel that your work wasn't adding to the growth of the business? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point feel blocked from doing your best due to a tool or process we use? {No, Yes} |
| **Team progress in the last 30 days** |
| Did you proactively call at least one teammate to chat? {No, Yes} |
| Did you proactively solicit feedback from someone? {No, Yes} |
| Did you proactively give feedback to someone (either +ive or -ive)? {No, Yes} |
| Did you make an effort to actively listen and be present during meetings/calls? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point feel that your work was publicly recognised by a teammate? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point feel blocked from doing your best due to a teammate's actions? {No, Yes} |
| Did you at any point think about leaving the business due to the work or the people (i.e. not due to an inbound hiring inquiry)? {No, Yes} |
| **Wrap it up** |
| How would you describe your LAST month in the team in 10 words or less? {280 characters} |
| How would you like to describe your NEXT month in the team in 10 words or less? {280 characters} |

**One final thing**

Try to get into the habit of making notes of your one-to-ones and sharing them with the team member afterward. Otherwise, you might find yourself in hot water if want to let go of Charlie for performance reasons. Past performance is subjective enough, let alone without a record of course-correction conversations.

# 8. Team goals are not set regularly and transparently

## Why is this a problem?

Without a clear target to lock onto, a submarine's missile will veer off course, start to spin out of control and eventually just explode somewhere underwater. It might hit something and cause some damage, but will it inflict the killer blow it was intended for? Unlikely. The same goes for goals in the workplace.

Multiple studies have concluded that publicly shared goals are more likely to be achieved than privately held goals. Deloitte found that companies with quarterly individual goal-setting are 3.5 times more likely to be top quartile performers in their industry. But, according to Harvard Business School Press, less than 10% of employees know what their business's objectives are and how they are contributing to those goals. That's a hell of a lot of aimless torpedoes.

Feedback is how you give regular course-correction. But without giving Charlie clear goals, there's no direction guiding his course-correction.

## Steps to solve it

*Objectives and Key Results (OKRs)* is becoming popular as a goal-setting framework. It's certainly an improvement on KPIs. But many people struggle to implement OKRs - for good reason.

Through the 15-20 workshops I've led on OKRs, I found that:

- 90% of people get confused by the difference between an Objective and a Key Result (understandably);
- Team members struggle to set personal goals that "display a 10x-style mindset and shouldn't be able to be achieved";
- The requirement to have every employee set individual goals means it falls apart if C-Suite aren't fully bought in

I prefer to simplify goal setting with *Team Milestones*.

Start by clearly defining the *four most important health metrics* for the team. They might be:

1. Growth in leads/accounts/users/revenue/costs
2. Retention of accounts/users/revenue
3. The value that accounts/users get from your product or service
4. The growth that your business delivers its employees

The direction of these metrics should clearly dictate whether the daily activities of team members are having their desired impact and therefore whether your idea/team/business is sustainable.

Once your four most important health metrics are selected, put some milestones behind them for the next month. E.g.

1. Grow nurtured leads from 80 to 100
2. Grow new accounts from 25 to 30
3. Grow monthly active users from 35% to 40%
4. Grow our employee progress index from 60 to 70

Then, every Monday, have someone update the numbers for the past week and circulate them to the whole team. E.g.

| At end of week: | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grow nurtured leads from 80 to 100 | 80 | 84 | 90 | 90 | 96 |
| Grow new accounts from 25 to 30 | 25 | 25 | 26 | 28 | 31 |
| Grow monthly active users from 35% to 40% | 35% | 36% | 35% | 37% | 39% |
| Grow our employee progress index from 60 to 70* | 60 | n/a | n/a | n/a | 68 |

*Monthly reading

I've not yet found an easier, more effective way to create alignment and teamwork amongst team members.

## Kids vs Adults

Kids know that eating their greens helps them grow. But they don't do it. Well, not much, and usually not voluntarily. They wait for their parents to push it on them. It just doesn't taste as good as the other stuff on their plate. And how good can it actually be if, right now, it tastes bad?

Adults know that asking for feedback helps them grow. But they don't do it. Well, not much, and usually not voluntarily. They wait for their managers to push it on them. It just doesn't feel as good as the other stuff on their plate. And how good can it actually be if, right now, it might make me feel bad?

# 9. Employees get given a rank or performance score

## Why is this a problem?

I'm yet to find a study that shows that ranking Charlie against his cohort will improve Charlie's performance or provide a competitive advantage to his team. Below are three reasons why no such data exists.

### It's demotivating

When you use a ranked distribution to assign employees a number from one to five, only 5-10% of people get top marks. The rest, mostly very smart and capable, feel inferior.  E.g. Charlie received A's all through school and university. But Joe and Billy have been around for years and just kind of fit the mold a little better. They can't all be fives so now Charlie gets a four. Charlie feels incompetent for the first time in his life, even though he was enjoying the role. He will forever associate this feeling of failure with this team.

Or maybe Charlie deserves a five which means that Jo, who knows the business and the industry inside out, must get a four. Jo, a loyal

employee of seven years, decides that it's time to leave and try something new. Along with Jo goes all her knowledge. Nobody wins. What a stupid system.

### It kills teamwork

If management's objective is to rank employees, then Charlie's objective will be to achieve the highest rank possible. Simple. This means out-scoring teammates and others in the business in his cohort. Teamwork can not and does not flourish in this situation.

### It's backward-looking

According to surveys of Howamigoing users, ratings are six times less helpful to their development than qualitative feedback. Why? Because while ratings may tell Charlie where he stands, they're focused on the past and they don't tell Charlie how to improve. To improve Charlie's performance, you need to focus on the future. It's pretty hard to improve someone's past performance.

## Steps to solve it

Rather than giving Charlie *one number for the year*, give him *one thing to work on next month*. It's more actionable and much less demotivating.

If you're using ratings to decide on or justify a pay rise or bonus, then consider these two truths:

1. What you can afford to pay people each year depends on your company's profit. Some years you don't make a profit.
2. Except for salespeople, it's mathematically impossible to correlate someone's contribution to the business' revenue. Let alone profit.

**Mathematically impossible?**

Let's say Charlie is a very simple person and that his performance each day can be accurately described as good or bad. So just two outcomes. Then in the only five days, there are 2x2x2x2x2=32 performance combinations. In 52 weeks, there are over one trillion good/bad performance combinations. I have a degree in Mathematics but I'd have a hard time creating a formula that fairly maps 1 trillion employee performance outcomes to a single performance rating. And besides, human output over the course of a nine-hour day is much more nuanced than good and bad.

# 10. Performance feedback discussed alongside remuneration

## Why is this a problem?

Two simple reasons.

### Pay is dictated by market forces, budgets, and interpersonal politics, not individual performance

Most jobs are placed in a market-competitive pay range before an employee is hired. It's within this range that initial compensation packages are negotiated - before any performance is established.

Once pay is set, future pay rises are driven by:

1. Whether the boss wants to retain Charlie;
2. The amount of raise the boss thinks is needed; and
3. The department's budget.

The boss' desire to keep Charlie is based on countless variables. E.g.

1. Inter-personal history
2. Current project demands
3. Near-term staffing needs

4. Ability to hire someone else on short notice
5. Political positioning for the boss to their boss.

Sure, Charlie will need to be good at his job, but the pay rise isn't correlated to his day-to-day contributions. And mathematically, it's impossible to try to correlate the two (see Mistake #9).

Take for example when Charlie threatens to quit. If you want to keep him, you'll respond with "How much will it take for you to stay?" Charlie will cite the pay gap to a more generous competitor, you'll see if the department can afford the rise, and it's done.

It may feel like performance came into it, but it's really only a subjective snap judgment and afterthought - the real driving issue was market forces and budgets.

**Linking pay to performance feedback kills personal development and teamwork**

If your objective for the performance review is to determine remuneration, Charlie's objective will be to achieve the highest pay rise or bonus possible. Simple.

Do you think that Charlie will be open and honest about his areas for development, his failures over the past year and what he needs to learn to be better at his job when his family desperately needs extra money for childcare? Do you think Charlie will praise his colleagues' great work when they're competing for the same bonus pool? Very unlikely. Charlie will be motivated by short-term financial gain rather than personal development and learning.

## Steps to solve it

Be transparent and honest. If you've hired smart people, they'll be able to call your bullshit fairly quickly. Any attempt to sugar-coat reality will soon lead to mistrust and a lack of respect in you as a leader.

So, schedule your compensation discussion a couple of months ahead of your next career feedback discussion. Send the message that you don't want Charlie's personal growth to be impacted by the team's profits. Tell Charlie that his salary is based on (and make sure it's based on):

1. The market salary for his position,
2. An adjustment based on what the company can afford, and
3. The company-specific responsibilities imbued in his role.

If Charlie received a bonus, tell him it's because (and make sure it's because):

1. The company outperformed, or
2. his team outperformed.

Then Charlie will be focused on team and company success rather than personal glory. Perhaps more importantly, Charlie will be focused on feedback for personal development, not for financial gain. And that's the hallmark of a sustainable, high-performance feedback culture.

## The Feedback Train

The longer you wait to jump off a train, the more momentum it has. The more it might hurt. The more uncertain you get about the fall. And so the more you delay.

In that sense, asking for feedback is a lot like jumping off a train. Be the considerate traveller who makes lots of small stops to take in their surroundings and check their compass still points north before they veer too far off course. Ask for feedback on your work regularly, before people's opinions (including your own) gather too much momentum. You'll get hurt a lot less with monthly feedback than if you wait for an annual evaluation.

Scratches are easier to recover from than sprains.

# TL;DR
(too long; didn't read)

# Summary of mistakes

| This situation... | Results in... |
|---|---|
| **New staff get minimal feedback during probation** | 1. Lack of direction/course-correction during a critical performance period<br>2. Personal biases during hiring process compounded |
| **People aren't trained on giving feedback** | 1. Low-quality output persists<br>2. Feedback surprises at end of year<br>3. Environment of uncertainty and anxiety |
| **Feedback is too focused on weaknesses** | 1. Kills confidence which kills performance<br>2. Detracts from amplifying key talents/strengths |
| **No means to give anonymous feedback to others** | 1. Fear of hurting feelings means feedback is "watered down" and not helpful to the recipient<br>2. Difficult to accurately gauge what's working and what's not |
| **No forum for publicly praising others' work** | 1. Positive behaviour not reinforced<br>2. Staff anxiety over the quality of their work<br>3. Feelings of inadequacy from not having work recognised |
| **Using Word/Excel/Docs for performance feedback** | 1. Waste of time and money - an administrative nightmare<br>2. Difficult to do in real-time - formal feedback becomes infrequent<br>3. Lack of anonymity means feedback gets "watered down" |
| **One-to-one catch-ups are not held consistently** | 1. Staff disconnected from managers<br>2. Critical upward feedback not captured<br>3. Legal issues when terminating staff |
| **Team goals are not set regularly and transparently** | 1. Business vision and objectives not understood and/or prioritised<br>2. Team members lack direction<br>3. Competing priorities destroy teamwork and productivity |
| **Employees get given a rank or performance score** | 1. Mathematically flawed<br>2. Demotivates 90% of staff<br>3. Doesn't provide a competitive advantage to the business |
| **Performance feedback discussed alongside remuneration** | 1. Staff are not open and honest about their failures, lessons and growth needs<br>2. Staff compete over profits rather than cooperate on priorities |

# Where to from here?
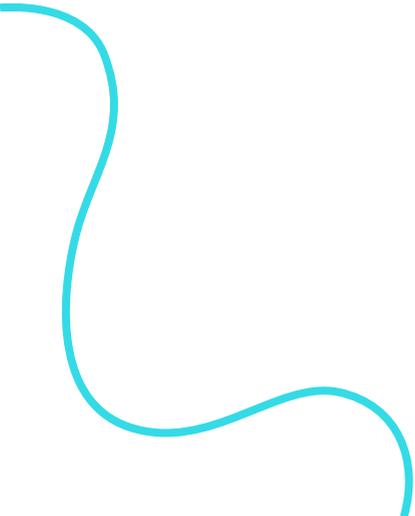
## Don't be disheartened!

If your team is encountering any of the challenges outlined in this guide, don't be disheartened! No team starts out with perfect processes and there's no such thing as a perfect culture. Rome wasn't built in a day, but thankfully constructing a feedback process is a much simpler project.

If the thought of having to do a full company-wide rollout is preventing you from taking action, then just start with one team. Commit to letting it run for a quarter and go from there. There is such little downside in trying new cultural initiatives. Much less downside than trying to launch a new product or service line!

## Don't go it alone!

Humans need tools to improve their life situations. It's been that way for thousands of years. Spears, flints, wheels, planes, laptops, software, you name it. Tools help us achieve more with less. Trying to modernise your employee feedback processes with Microsoft Excel or Google Sheets will only end in tears. You will spend so much time organising, aggregating and filing documents, it simply isn't scalable. Also, you'll be at serious risk of inadvertently leaking sensitive employee information.

There are now some good solutions that automate feedback collation for less than a cup of coffee per employee per week. They will save you time and give your team a competitive advantage.

I do believe Howamigoing is the best tool available.

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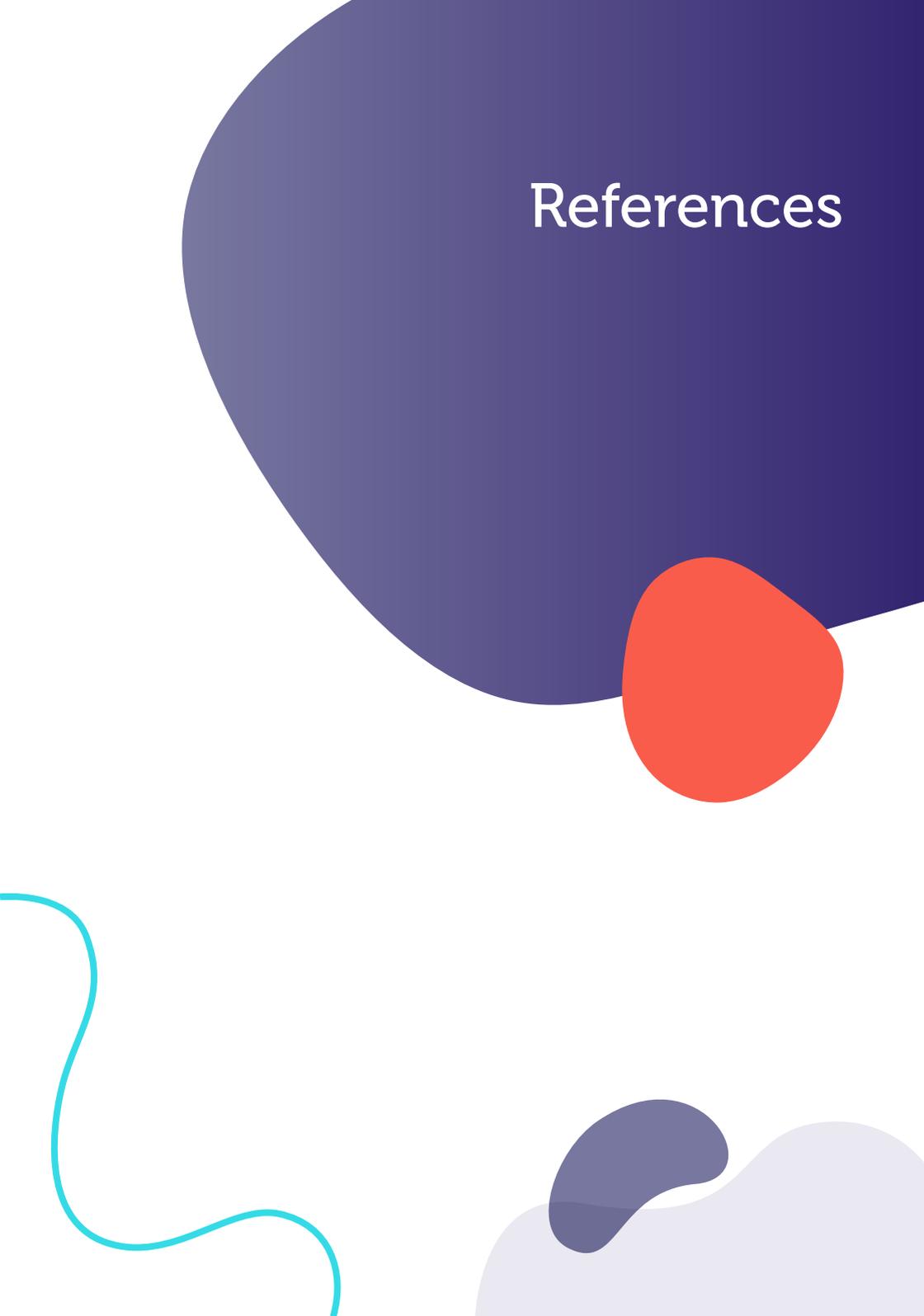
# Books

Happy by Derren Brown
Atomic Habits by James Clear
Good to Great by Jim Collins
The Culture Code by Daniel Coyle
Get Rid Of The Performance Review by Samuel A Culbert
Good People Bad Managers by Samuel A Culbert
Measure What Matters by John Doerr
Originals by Adam Grant
Tribes by Seth Godin
Sapiens by Yoval Noah Harari
Do Open by David Hieatt
Do Purpose by David Hieatt
The Hard Thing About Hard Things by Ben Horowitz
Thinking, Hard And Slow by Daniel Khaneman
The Art of Thinking Clearly by Rolf Dobelli
When Coffee And Kale Compete by Alan Klement
Speak Up, Show Up and Stand Out by Loretta Malandro
Deep Work by Cal Newport
12 Rules For Life by Jordan B. Peterson
The War of Art by Steven Pressfield
Radical Candor by Kim Scott
Start With Why by Simon Sinek
Thanks For The Feedback by Doug Stone and Sheila Heen
The Art of Possibility by Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin
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