



# Extraordinary Influence

## How Great Leaders Bring Out the Best in Others

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

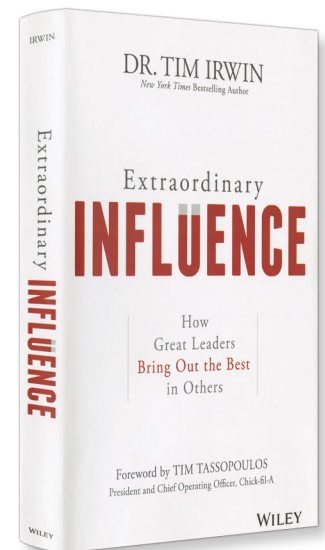
Leaders have long searched for the key to help others excel and realize their potential. What if we could transform those under our influence and light fires of motivation? What if those we lead found great purpose in what they do and worked at their jobs with all their heart? Ultimately, don't we hope to foster intrinsic motivation so that the individuals we lead become better employees?

Recent discoveries of brain science and the wisdom of top CEO's that Dr. Tim Irwin interviewed for *Extraordinary Influence* provide exciting new answers. Irwin reveals that in most organizations, the methods used to provide feedback to employees, such as performance appraisal or multi-rater feedback systems, are not up to the task. Top CEO's confirm that these methods tend to engage a natural "negativity bias" that is hardwired in us all.

Instead, science in recent years has discovered that affirmation sets in motion huge positive changes in the brain. It releases certain neurochemicals associated with well-being and higher performance. Mobilizing this discovery, *Extraordinary Influence* offers a compelling new approach to align workers with an organization's mission, strategy and goals.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Research showing that affirmation works better than constructive criticism.
- How to use Words of Life to strengthen people's core.
- The meaning of Alliance Feedback and how to use it most effectively.
- To motivate high-potential people and reinvent performance feedback.



by Dr. Tim Irwin

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: EXTRAORDINARY INFLUENCE

by Dr. Tim Irwin

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## Part I: The Science of Extraordinary Influence

### Many Leaders Create an Effect They Did Not Intend

The age-old question for every organization is, how do we bring out the best in those we are responsible for leading? How do we get them to care? How do we ensure productivity, quality, timeliness and great attention to customers? How do we help them love their jobs? The answer to these questions seems to vary widely among different employees.

How we motivate another person or group of people to do something and do it well is a conundrum. It is surprising how often we resort to a default position of a negative consequence for not doing something versus an approach that actually results in a better worker and a better person.

We gain an extraordinary ability to transform others when we affirm them versus when we apply what might euphemistically be called “constructive criticism.” Here are some phrases we hear routinely from the task-driven style of leadership.

- “I need to light a fire under her.” — A phrase originally used to motivate chimney sweeps who feared climbing to the top inside a high chimney.
- “I’m going to hold you accountable.” — Accountable is derived from the Old French word *acont*, such as counting money. The connotation is the thinly veiled threat that “You better do what I said to do.”

The inherent belief reflected in these sayings is that “I’m going to get you to do something you are fundamentally resistant to doing.” They suggest that workers

or students or players or children are lazy, irresponsible, lacking ambition, and less intelligent and, therefore, require constant scrutiny to ensure that work gets done.

We might say, “That’s a bit harsh.” True, but in our drive to get results out of the people we manage or teach or coach or parent, we may adopt methods that appeal to our fundamental need to control outcomes.

It’s now clear from a growing body of research that for a leader to be effective, it’s vital that we spend time and energy in both task-oriented management as well as a framework that values the emotional and relational dimensions of the people we lead.

Here’s the challenge: Recent brain research argues that many of the things we do to motivate others, in fact, accomplishes the exact opposite of what we intend. We inadvertently engage the wrong part of the brain, thus short-circuiting what influence we might want to have.

What if we could get people to work with all their heart? What we want as leaders, parents or teachers is to transform the attitudes, the work habits and the passion of those we influence — to get them to do the assigned task with a sense of commitment and energy.

### New Brain Research Explains How We Bring Out the Best in Others

Why do we want affirmation? Of course, it feels good, but why? Aristotle observed that every person is drawn by a telos, or purpose, in their lives. Deep down, we want to know that we gave it our all to pursue high and noble ends and to realize a deep sense of significance in our lives. We long for confirmation that, in fact, our lives count for something more than just fighting gridlocked traffic.



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The right kind of affirmation satisfies this compelling need. Deep affirmation gets to our core and affirms who we aspire to be. Although it is very satisfying to know deep down that we are pursuing purpose, perhaps the most powerful personal affirmation occurs when another person acknowledges the strength of our character.

When someone of significance affirms us particularly in a deep way, certain beliefs are formed. These beliefs are stored in our core — that person living inside us who thinks, feels, forms opinions and quietly speaks to us. As opportunities and circumstances occur, beliefs direct our actions. Affirmation from others whom we respect forms beliefs in our core that guide our actions.

Our brains benefit dramatically from affirmation. They *light up* with electrical activity. We feel more optimistic and work more productively. Conversely, criticism activates different parts of the brain that metaphorically make us go dark.

Brain research indicates that affirmation

- Buffers stress and improves higher cognitive thinking and problem-solving.
- Positively affects a region of the brain associated with subjective value, that is, the location of self-worth. The ventromedial prefrontal cortex evaluates how we subjectively feel about ourselves.
- Improves self-control and makes us more efficient.
- Makes us happier and more productive.
- Activates the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, which is related to positive behavior changes.
- Activates brain circuits that are affected by the release of hormones like oxytocin and vasopressin, both known for their role in trust and attachment.
- Fosters innovation — it activates areas of the brain associated with calmness and openness to new ideas.

In most organizations, the methods used to provide feedback to employees, such as performance appraisal or multi-rater feedback systems, often accomplish directly the opposite of what was intended because the recipients unrelentingly focus on their deficits. Brain science tells us that these methods tend to engage a natural *negativity bias*, which is hardwired in us all. In many respects, it also just seems easier to criticize.

There are methods to engage parts of the brain that are inherently better at problem solving and innovation. Great leaders work hard at not tapping into the negativity bias inherent in our brains and, instead, focus their energy on

accessing the parts of our brains that make us innovative, better at solving problems and more resilient.

There is a clear case for discussing and remedying the behavior of followers who are out of alignment with the goals we've set, but we now have irrefutable evidence that how we bring about alignment makes a huge difference in the motivation and effectiveness of workers.

Let's establish that positive influence is the outcome we seek. If we want to exert extraordinary influence and bring out the best in those around us, we must master the art of affirmation. We must learn how to affirm individuals, teams and even whole organizations. ●

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## Part II: How Extraordinary Influence Works

### Tactical Affirmation: Affirming Style and Competence

Affirmation must be thoughtfully directed to three dimensions in the human psyche, which makes any transformative influence we might exert with another person more effective. Affirmation varies according to

- 1. Customary style** — those observable patterns that consistently characterize us. Our style determines how well others receive us and our ideas.
- 2. Competence** — our skills, abilities and knowledge behind effective actions. Our competencies determine what we are able to do.
- 3. Core** — our inner person — the leader inside us. Our core determines who we are — our character.

Affirmation of our style and competence belong in the category of *tactical influence*. These dimensions are the ground level, daily, transactional initiatives we use to do our jobs. Leaders use affirmation day-to-day, week-to-week.

Affirming someone's core is *strategic influence*. Strategic means far reaching, deeper, transformational and over-arching. Strategic influence potentially changes those we lead in their inner person. Leaders use affirmation less frequently and more opportunistically.

Great leaders create an intentional culture of affirmation using the appropriate content of tactical and strategic affirmation. A healthy, well-functioning organization (or a family or a team) needs both tactical and strategic influence.

We all have our customary style, which defines us in fairly consistent ways others come to expect. Our style

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exerts a huge impact on how well we wear on others. Most importantly, it determines how others receive us and our ideas. Our style also wraps around our abilities and skills — our competencies — and substantially determines how effectively those abilities can be deployed.

To affirm the style of those we lead, we must develop a vocabulary of style. As in most areas of human behavior, our customary style contains a light and a dark side. The four types of style — doer, advocate, idealist and challenger — include characteristics that tend to wear well with others as well as those that interfere with effectiveness.

For example, the doer uses focused action to accomplish tasks. Upsides of the doer include being practical, organized, focused and rational. The possible downsides include lack of attention to the interpersonal dimension, being low on passion and creativity, and displaying disrespect for those who lack technical skills and logic. Typical affirmations include, “Thank you for your focus on meeting the deadline” and “Thank you for bringing the discussion back to the real issues.”

Our competencies, like judgment, make a huge impact on our success in work and in life. Praising the competence of anyone we seek to lead is vital. A number of CEOs interviewed spoke about how to affirm the work of our subordinates. These recommendations are summarized in the following five guidelines:

1. Show appreciation for the competencies underneath the actions.
2. CEOs recommended accomplishments be affirmed but also kept in context — why it mattered at the time.
3. Affirmation must be timely — real time.
4. Trust must precede feedback, particularly if the feedback is contrary.
5. Affirmation must emanate from an authentic place when feedback is given.

When a boss affirms a worker’s style or competence, he or she grows in the conviction, “I am competent. I can do this.” When new or more challenging circumstances arise, the affirmed person acts in concert with these beliefs.

### **Strategic Influence: How to Give Words of Life**

To truly bring about personal transformation, we must reach a person’s core with Words of Life. Our core has a voice, which social scientists sometimes call self-talk. Whether we are aware of it, there is a steady conversation going on inside us, and when we learn to pay attention to that voice, the revelations about ourselves can be at least informative if not startling.

Our core learns, forms opinions and serves as the chief repository of our beliefs. Our beliefs provide a major governance factor in our behavior. When our beliefs are sound and true, they lead to effective leadership. When those beliefs are errant, and we act on those errant beliefs, the results can be catastrophic.

Words of Life transform us, because they speak the language of the core. They are significantly different from the words we might use to affirm another’s style or competence. Words of Life transform us and bring out the best in the important people we long to influence.

The act of affirming someone with Words of Life implants redemptive beliefs in a person’s core, which, in turn, produces redemptive actions. Redemptive here means lifesaving, liberating, nurturing and transformative.

What is the common thread in Words of Life? These powerful words speak about our character — the unassailability of our inner person. They involve qualities such as integrity, courage, humility, judgment, authenticity, self-regulation, wisdom, candor, resilience and influence.

For example, one might praise another’s authenticity by saying, “Your team really respects and trusts you. I believe that results from being truthful and realistic with them. You don’t try to manipulate them with rosy forecasts not grounded in reality. Your peers really trust you as well. They believe whatever you tell them is true. Your authenticity is a huge asset, and I wish more people followed your example.”

In most cases, leaders tend to affirm an action someone has taken. A far more powerful step is to affirm some dimension of a person’s core which prompted the desired action.

How do we best convey Words of Life?

- We must have an intact core ourselves.
- We must be authentic.
- Our words must be carefully considered.
- We must use the right vocabulary — Words of Life draw from the well of character.
- Words of Life are conveyed upon a foundation of trust between the giver and the receiver.
- Words of Life may be given spontaneously or planned, as long as they are thoughtful and sincere.
- Words of Life must be given when the receiver is the sole focus at the moment.

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## Words of Death: Constructive Criticism Fails Because Our Brains Are Hard Wired for Something Better

Even if we possess an emotionally stalwart constitution, our spirit can still be crushed when we are the recipient of withering criticism, ridicule or shame from an important other, such as a parent, a coach, a teacher, a peer or a boss.

When we give feedback to a subordinate absent concern about his or her person, we bypass the parts of the person's brain that powers innovation, problem solving, creativity and self-worth. What's worse, we engage the part of the brain that shuts out any positive influence we might intend!

Here are some findings from brain research about what happens when we diminish people with criticism:

- Criticism engages our amygdala, the part of the brain that houses the “fight or flight” response.
- During criticism, our brains have less access to some of the most positive resources of the brain, such as higher order thinking, self-reflection, creativity, problem solving and stress regulation.
- During criticism, the recipient absorbs the negative emotions of the critic.
- Abusive supervision leads to extreme negative consequences such as decreased creativity, productivity, commitment and increased depression and anxiety.
- When employees don't see criticism as accurate and relevant to themselves, they become hostile and fail to see validity even when the feedback is applicable.
- There is a trickle-down effect wherein abusive department leaders create abusive team leaders.

Whether intended or not, the recipient of critical feedback hears that it's not *what we did*, but it's more about *who we are*. Disapproval and disparagement from an important person sends us a fundamental message that we're not okay. Criticism diminishes our self-worth, and our brains react with profound negativity. A key to happy and productive employees is a leader's consistently supportive behavior.

Like a family unit, positivity and negativity are often carried on across generations. A negative leader is more likely to groom negative leaders under his or her charge. Negativity is contagious, so it perpetuates negativity among those over whom we have influence.

Culture significantly influences our leadership behavior. An organizational culture that emphasizes structure,

obligations and punishments for deviant behavior further diminishes followers' creative insight and attention span.

One of the phrases that we've heard all our lives is “constructive criticism.” What it usually means is that “I'm going to gut you emotionally, but my motives are positive.” There is usually nothing constructive about it and telling us in advance puts us on hyper alert. The term “constructive criticism” should be eradicated.

## Alliance Feedback: What Seasoned CEOs Know About Helping Others Change

Without the use of negative feedback or criticism, how do we persuade those we lead to change what they are doing when they are off track, being ineffective, making mistakes or not acting consistently with the mission, goals or values of the organization?

*Alliance Feedback* describes how to get people in line with their own espoused values and aspirations and/or the mission, strategy, goals and values of their organization. Alliance Feedback points out contradictions between a person's intentions and his or her present behavior in a supportive manner.

There are two types of Alliance Feedback.

**Aspirational Feedback** tends to be focused on an individual's hopes and dreams. “You are more likely to achieve your aspirations if you do this.” The fundamental idea is to be sure we create a linkage between something the person aspires to achieve and a change he or she needs to make.

**Missional Feedback** builds upon a boss and employee's mutual or collective desire to accomplish our organization's mission and mutually determined performance goals that they both believe are valuable contributions to the overall enterprise. When an employee departs from actions that support the mission and goals, it provides an opportunity to point out these incongruities.

The most important feature of the Missional Feedback conversation between a boss and subordinate is the establishment of a connection between the employee's work and the mission and goals which they mutually agree are relevant and important. There are eight conditions that make the above approach effective. These perspectives will galvanize our perspective and lay the groundwork for effective Alliance Feedback:

1. **Remember that our amygdala possesses an ever-present negativity bias.** It's wired to detect threats. In war zones, enemy combatants sometimes lay out trip wires with transparent fishing line connected to the detonator of an explosive charge.

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When we want to help someone grow, we avoid their trip wires and are intentional about making the conversation feel safe.

2. **Be sure that we stay grounded ourselves.** We need to set aside distractions and make sure the recipient knows that he or she is our only focus at that moment. We need to prepare for the conversation and to make sure the timing is right for both of us.
3. **If we know deep down that a person is for us, we can hear just about anything they convey to us.** One way to avoid engaging the defensive side of a person's amygdala is to make sure the person feels safe.
4. **Attribute positive motives to the recipient** of Alliance Feedback.
5. **A critical aspect of Aspirational Feedback is that we want to help those we lead to become more self-aware** about how their actions potentially create a barrier to their aspirations.
6. **Some CEOs stressed that feedback should be encouraging and challenging** at the same time.
7. **The tone of the Alliance Feedback conversation must be professional** and adult at all times.
8. **There is a huge difference between discussing an action versus criticizing a person.** Alliance Feedback should be helpful without being demeaning.

### **Extraordinary Influence for Underperformers: Bringing Out the Best in Someone Who Has Lost His Way**

Though not always, performance problems are typically rooted in a person's ineffective style, their lack of competence, or a breached core or some combination of the three.

One problem we all experience in vetting the talent and condition of someone's core is that a person's real self surfaces only with time and stress. We are always who we are given enough time and enough stress. Still, we must be good stewards of our organization's resources (time, energy and, often, money). We must be able to quickly size up whether we should deploy resources to get a person in line with the mission, strategies, goals and culture of the company.

When a person works in our organization and exhibits poor performance, how do we make the distinction between a person with a problem and a problem person? A series of questions help to get to the right answer quickly.

- Is the person performing their job overall with excellence? (Yes or No.)
- How well do the person's skills, ability and temperament fit the requirements of the position? (Great Fit/Adequate Fit/Poor Fit.)
- Does the person's poor performance seem to be temporary, circumstantial or more enduring? For example, does the person need to acquire technical knowledge or other skills to perform well in their job? Are there circumstances that account for an individual's temporary drop in performance, such as an ailing parent who needs special attention? Does the person work under a perpetual cloud of tension or constantly seem out of synch with the team?
- What is the likelihood that the person in question can perform well in their job in the future within a reasonable time frame? (High Likelihood/Low Likelihood.)

In answering the fourth question, it behooves us to be brutally honest.

A major dilemma is that we cannot exert extraordinary influence over everyone. Some individuals struggle within themselves such that no amount of affirmation or Alliance Feedback or other developmental resources can bring them in line inside the boundaries of our organization. Any number of resources may help heal a person's core, but any job with even normal day-to-day stresses is not the best place to get well, especially when their problems impose themselves on others. No one is perfect, and we all have a shadow in our core. We must have compassion for all while also recognizing that even healthy organizations are fragile. Compassion must be married to judgment and courage when dealing with a problem person.

Helping problem people leave the organization is, in fact, a key element to bringing out the best in others. The impact of a problem person can be so toxic if not removed that a leader forfeits the opportunity to bring out the best in those needed to conduct the vital work of the organization. ●

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## **Part III: Special Applications of Extraordinary Influence**

### **Extraordinary Influence for Teams: Three Levers for High Performance**

A constant interplay exists among three dimensions in our lives — the I, the We and the It.

The I represents our individual hopes, dreams and concerns. The We represents the collective aspirations, interests

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and potential conflicts among the group members. The It expresses our purpose, mission, task or quest.

A lever can be thought of as a great effect from a small cause. For a leader, these three dimensions function as levers. A leader's attention to the individuals, the group and the task constitute levers a leader uses to manage a team or even a whole organization. For a team to perform with excellence, all three require balanced attention. When any of the three is over or under emphasized, problems ensue. Despite the constantly shifting needs of a normal team, a skilled leader must learn to lever all three dimensions to restore the team to balance.

**Individual team members — the I.** We might ask, “Why do individual concerns need attention — we’re building a team?” Individual team members must also be developed according to their specific needs and acknowledged for their individual contributions. Compensation, titles, special recognition and career paths represent just a few examples of actions that can be considered for individuals on even the most healthy and well-functioning teams. Attention to individuals does not reflect inattention to the team.

Asking a question or two that each team member answers about himself/herself gets a meeting rolling. For example, where did you grow up? What did you do after high school? Give a 60-second summary of your career highlights. What is an interesting but unknown fact about you? Who has been the person of greatest influence in your life? A warm-up exercise, such as these sample questions, engages the I and creates a readiness to attend to the We and the It.

**Extraordinary influence on the We.** To harvest the benefits of teamwork, an effective team leader must generate a strong sense of the We. Like any enduring relationship, the potential synergy of working with others does not spontaneously materialize. It requires disciplined intentionality.

The We also has a collective core, which reflects the team's character. When a team is healthy and well-functioning, Words of Life should be spoken to the team's core. When a team is dysfunctional, Alliance Feedback is in order.

**Extraordinary influence on the It — the mission or quest of the team.** When thoughtfully formed and skillfully communicated, a purpose or mission (the It) provides motivation for the team. A great mission becomes a quest. A team leader exerts extraordinary influence with this powerful tool. It contains the potential to take even the most mundane work or project and lifts the collective self-esteem.

The leading hotelier in the world and founder of the Ritz Carlton Hotel Company and Capella Hotels, Horst

Schulze, makes a practice of personally opening all his new hotels. We would probably agree that public perception ranks some hotel jobs lower on the desirability scale, such as housekeepers. Yet, Schulze urges his housekeepers to be the best in the world. During training, he stresses to housekeepers, “We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen.”

Along with many other supporting policies and expectations, housekeepers are empowered to make many decisions in the interest of providing a superior customer experience to all guests. Schulze's mission to be the best, supported with hundreds of other quality practices, led to the Ritz Carlton receiving the prestigious Malcolm Baldrige award, not once but twice, thus making it the only company in the hotel industry to achieve such a distinction.

The accomplishment of a great mission provides the leader with tremendous opportunities to affirm the team.

### **Motivating High Potentials: The Four Transformations to Extraordinarily Influence the Best**

One of the great tests of leadership is the development of other leaders. The senior leaders of many organizations know that some subset of their workers is more talented, smart, clever, hard-working and has better people skills than others. Many organizations refer to these individuals as high-potential employees/leaders, or HiPos.

The general view is that HiPos should be given an enriched or higher octane set of job experiences and development or training resources to prepare them for bigger jobs in the future. In addition to whatever technical skills might be important to acquire, there are four actions we must take to accelerate our HiPos' development.

1. **Affirm HiPos' style and competence but especially their core.** Give HiPos Words of Life. Provide frequent Alliance Feedback, and be sure to connect the feedback to HiPos' personal aspirations — their hopes and dreams. Encourage self-affirmation. We foster self-affirmation by asking questions like, “Tell me what you feel you did well in the meeting today.”
2. **Encourage HiPos to actively build and guard their core.** A strong core comprises the most important element of great leadership. The condition of our core determines the course of our lives, in general, and our effectiveness as a leader, in particular. In most cases, a strong core is the differentiator between those who build a great legacy versus those who end up in cataclysmic failure, such

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as those who were fired from their organization because of a breach of their core.

- 3. Urge HiPos to lead from influence and not from position or power.** Position power is overrated! Leaders must thoughtfully place HiPos in positions that require they learn to lead by influence and not by position power. We want to mentor our HiPos to lead with influence for one main reason. It engages those workers we lead to adopt higher levels of commitment to the mission, strategies and goals. It creates ownership, whereby followers take ownership of the outcomes.
- 4. Help HiPos develop courage.** Our affirmation of someone we mentor is highly effective in transforming that person, especially when we speak Words of Life into their core. In particular, we want to foster the development of courage, a vital attribute for senior management roles. By the very nature of the job, leaders must take risks. Our HiPos will not achieve their potential without developing courage. To develop great leaders, we must encourage them. Words of Life result in the *encouragement* of the recipient.

### Performance Appraisals That Lead to Extraordinary Influence

Performance feedback meetings are probably the most universally hated experiences in many organizations, both from the giver's and the receiver's perspective. In most cases, managers intend their feedback to improve employees' performance and increase their value to the organization. The reality is that most performance appraisals accomplish the exact opposite of what's intended. They close off communication and create stress and resentment on the receiver's part.

It seems obvious that the basic premise of most performance appraisal systems throws the hyper-defensive part of the brain (the amygdala) into overdrive. Some large companies are addressing common problems with the traditional systems. For example, Microsoft, Lilly, GE, Dell, The Gap, Accenture, Adobe, New York Life and others are getting rid of rating categories. Goldman Sachs, known for their highly mathematical 1-to-9 scales, recently stopped rating employees with numbers.

**What must any reinvention of performance feedback include?** A check-the-box system may inform, but it will not transform. Ultimately, a leader's transformational influence depends upon *the person of the leader*. It's

the personal deepening of the leader who must learn to connect with his or her followers in a more substantive way. A leader's solid core makes transformation of others possible.

The perspectives and practices to be valued when an organization wants to reinvent its performance review system include timeliness and affirmation of the core.

One of the most profound changes is frequency. There are a few irrefutable laws of human behavior. One law maintains that the closer to the occurrence of a certain behavior feedback ensues, the more effective the feedback.

The most important opportunities for transformation occur in our core. Affirmation of someone's core is likely less frequent but highly impactful when given. Affirmation of style and conduct lend themselves to frequent feedback. Affirmation of a person's core is likely more opportunistic.

**The What, How and Who dimensions must be included in any re-engineered performance management system.** Most legacy systems focus on *what* a person accomplished. The *how* may sometimes be included, but the *who* is where true transformation occurs. Brain research makes it clear that the most powerful Alliance Feedback ties performance comments to the standard of an employee's personal hopes, dreams and aspirations.

Tying development to the achievement of personal career goals connects with the parts of our brain responsible for innovation and resourcefulness.

**Build trust.** Have a foundation of trust, and be sure that the recipient of your feedback knows that, down deep, you are really "for them." This is particularly important when giving Alliance Feedback.

Think about the amazing world we could create for our organizations, our families and our communities if affirmation flowed freely and criticism became rare.

Let's just start by making a lot more affirming statements and a lot less diminishing ones. ●

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