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ESSENTIALS OF BUILDING
A CULTURE OF FEEDBACK

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1. Importance Of Feedback

I have always believed that the best ideas come out when we interact and brainstorm with each other. To facilitate this spontaneity, it was important for me to work towards creating a culture of openness.

An important factor to make these interactions effective was to get the participants into a mode of sharing thoughts with the sole intent of coming up with the best solution. I took upon myself to initiate feedback discussions that yielded the best results and went about starting important feedback sessions.
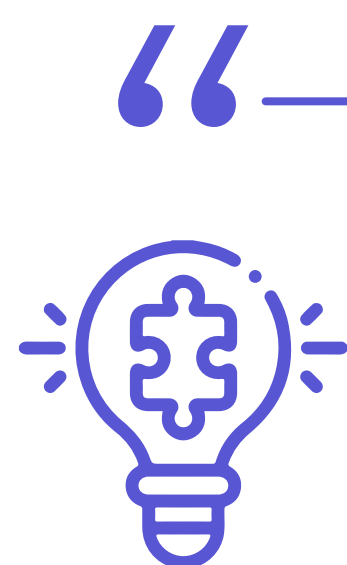
> "An important factor to make these interactions effective was to get the participants into a mode of sharing thoughts with the sole intent of coming up with the best solution."

Initiation was just the smaller of the challenges. I realised that making team members speak up - with their honest concerns and opinions - was the most crucial and difficult part of having these feedback sessions. To encourage my team members and get them acquainted with open and productive discussions, I went about (literally) asking feedback on everything we did as a team. Every meeting, presentation and policy discussion went through the feedback lens.

This was not easy in any way. I had to teach myself to speak much lesser than I ordinarily would, listen intently and most importantly, NOT shun even seemingly trivial inputs. As these sessions culminated, I saw that My team members grew increasingly comfortable with sharing open yet impactful inputs.

> "An important factor to make these interactions effective was to get the participants into a mode of sharing thoughts with the sole intent of coming up with the best solution."

With every iteration, our team grew better at conducting such sessions. From having to force my team members to voice out, these session became boiling pots for them to derive innovative HR strategies. Almost every exciting HR initiative that we brought in, came from one of these meetings.

These sessions are not alien to the way we work anymore - they are an essential part of the way our team functions. Zooming out, having an effective feedback session consists of all the elements of an effective communication process. Communication in any form is only successful if :

It allows for correct transmission of the content

It facilitates reception with ease
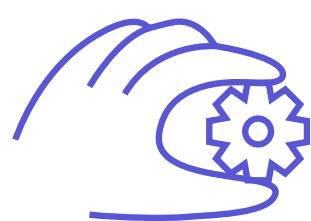
Actions are taken up based on the outcomes of the communication

And feedback is a technique of communication to which all above rules apply.

Hubspot, one of the best rated employers in the world has 'transparency' as one of their core values. When they grew into a 750+ global team in a meagre matter of years, living this value became challenging. They leverage technology to receive real-time feedback from all their team members across locations by using communication tools and survey tools to ensure quick action on these feedback.

2. The Anatomy of Effective Feedback

A meeting without a conclusion is merely a discussion and hence for a feedback session can be considered effective if by the end of it we could diagnose what went right and what didn't that facilitated in crafting an action plan too.
But for the feedback exercise to be effective, the foundational work starts much before the actual meeting. The planning towards it is as important as its execution. Thus, effective feedback can be divided into two constituent processes:

1. Pre-requisites for effective feedback

   and

2. Effectively conducting a feedback session

Planning The Session

Conducting and Documenting The Session

Corrective Measures
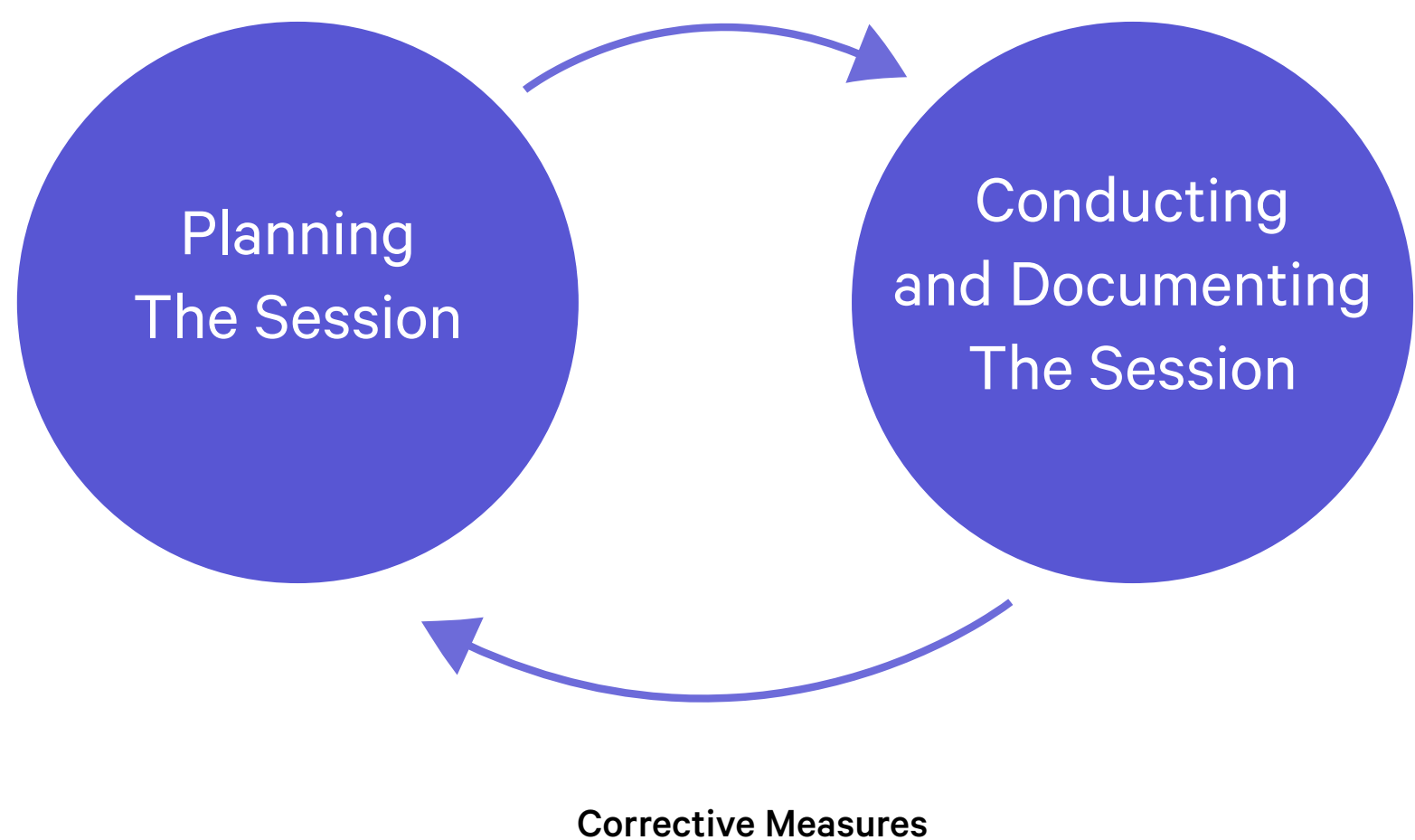
2.1 Pre-requisites for effective feedback

Below are a few points that have helped sail through even seemingly implausible feedback sessions:

1. Being prepared with data points
   Data helps discussions to be focused - avoiding vagueness and biases

2. Daily feedback conduct
   As a manager, live the values and hold frequent formal and informal feedback conversations -
   don't wait till the 'session' for surprises.

3. Solution mindset
   Prep yourselves to solve the issue - make a conscious effort to focus only on the matter under discussion.
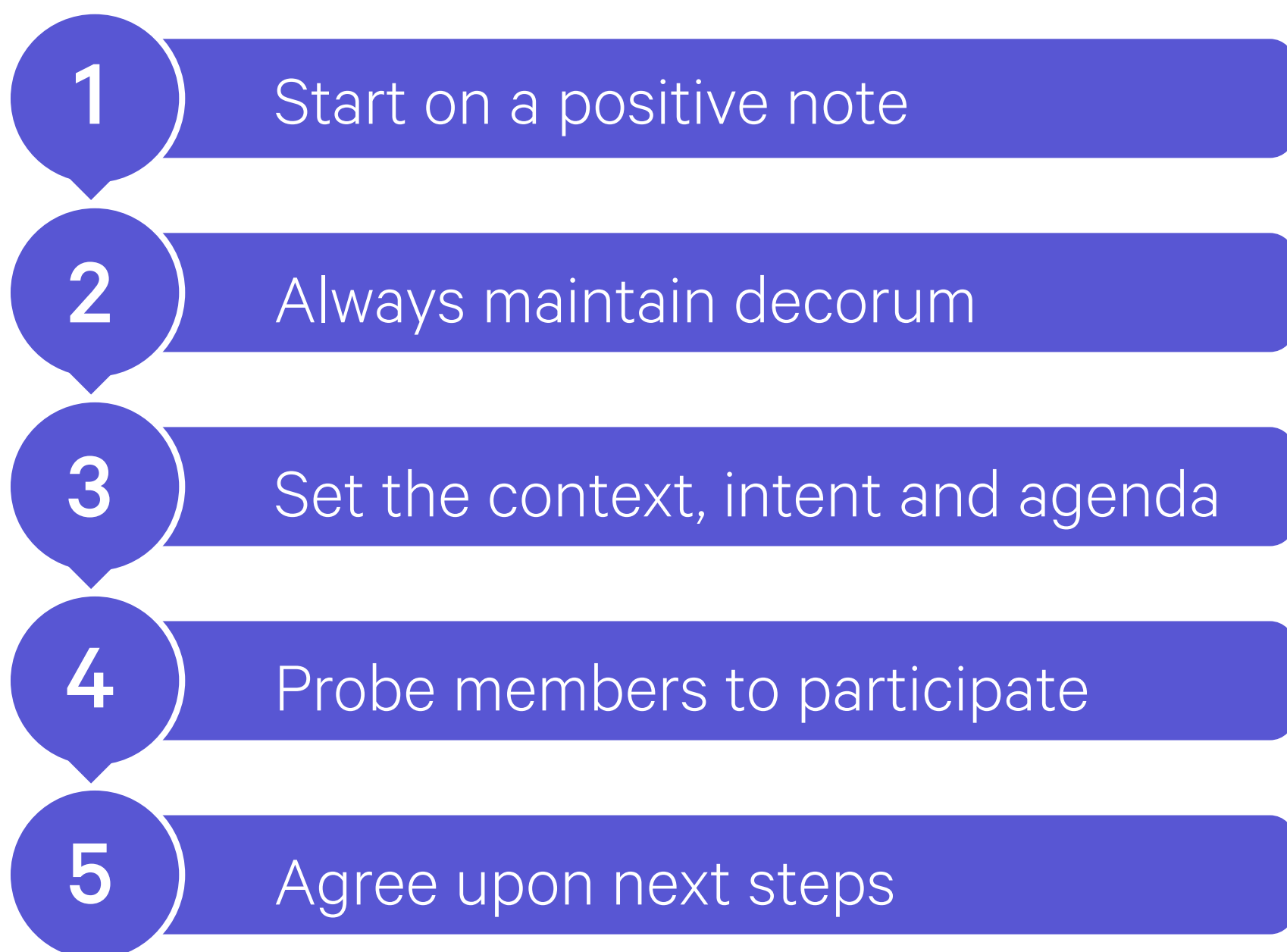
4. Anchor around organizational goals, mission, values and purpose
   Create mechanisms to measure alignment - how team and individual efforts are in line with
   organisational vision and mission.

2.2 Breaking down an ideal feedback session

A primary mandate for a feedback session to be effective is that the parties need to have tolerance and a strong intent to understand each other. Once that prerequisite is set, the following can be observed to streamlining the session:

1. Start the meeting on a positive note, irrespective of the situation
   (because employees have been building worst-case speculation from the moment of the meeting invite).

2. Maintain calm and have a welcoming demean-our
   (take it on yourself to maintain this status-quo ALL throughout the meeting)

3. Set the context, intent and agenda of the feedback session
   (preparing the agenda beforehand really helps here).

4. Probe employees to ask questions, clarify and discuss concerns
   (use these conversations to capture their perspectives)

5. Decide on what actions to be taken, to encompass all observations and conclusions from the meeting.
   (be candid on the performance gaps, if any - and allow them to narrate their side of the story and
    mutually agree upon next steps)

1	Start on a positive note
2	Always maintain decorum
3	Set the context, intent and agenda
4	Probe members to participate
5	Agree upon next steps

Steps to conducting an ideal feedback session

2.3 Addressing the cultural aspects of different geographies

For distributed global teams, feedback might mean slightly different things. Especially while providing feedback to expat employees, managers might face multiple cultural barriers. These regional differences in feedback perceptions could range from having a totally ad hoc feedback process like the majority of companies in Argentina to a highly structured feedback mechanism prevailing in South Korea. Below given is a table that briefly indicates the feedback focuses of about 24 countries across the world.

Table 1: Primary focus of feedback in different countries

North America

USA
- Setting mutual expectations
- Providing frequent performance feedback
- Formal periodic reviews

Mexico
- Development
- Appraisal of work done

South America

Brazil
- Constructive criticism

Argentina
- Ad hoc and informal work discussions

Europe

United Kingdom

- Evaluate accomplishments
- Assessing skill improvement requirements

Netherlands

- Semi-annual frequency
- Plan the activities undertaken
- Measure outputs
- Improvement of competencies

France

- Framing work objectives
- Appraise leadership abilities
- Appraise professionalism
- Evaluate individual performance
- Set new objective for the next period

Italy

- Periodic session
- Measure the achievement of objective
- Appraise problem solving
- Appraise leadership ability
- Improve quality of organisational relations

Spain

- Feedback held as a formality
- Data based performance evaluation

Poland

- Appraise employee knowledge
- Appraise project execution
- Appraise ability to take initiatives and resposibility
- Better communication and collaboration
- Plan training and development

Portugal

- Appraise goal attainment
- Evaluate behavioral competencies
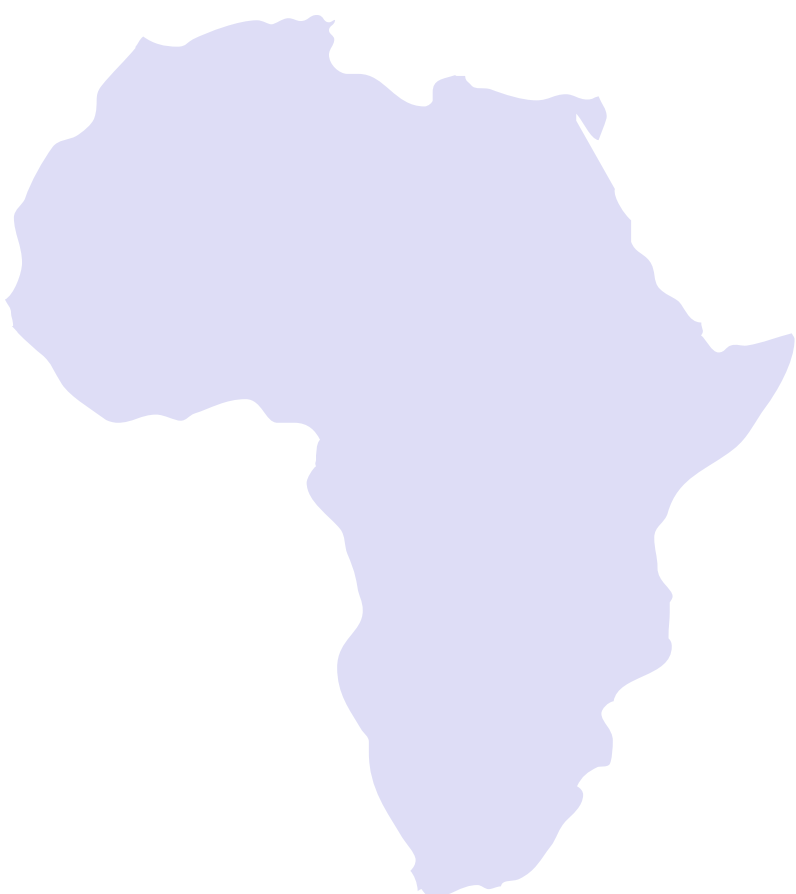- Appraise employee attitudes

Germany

- Co-worker feedback
- Appraise quality of work
- Appraise promptness
- Evaluate team fairness
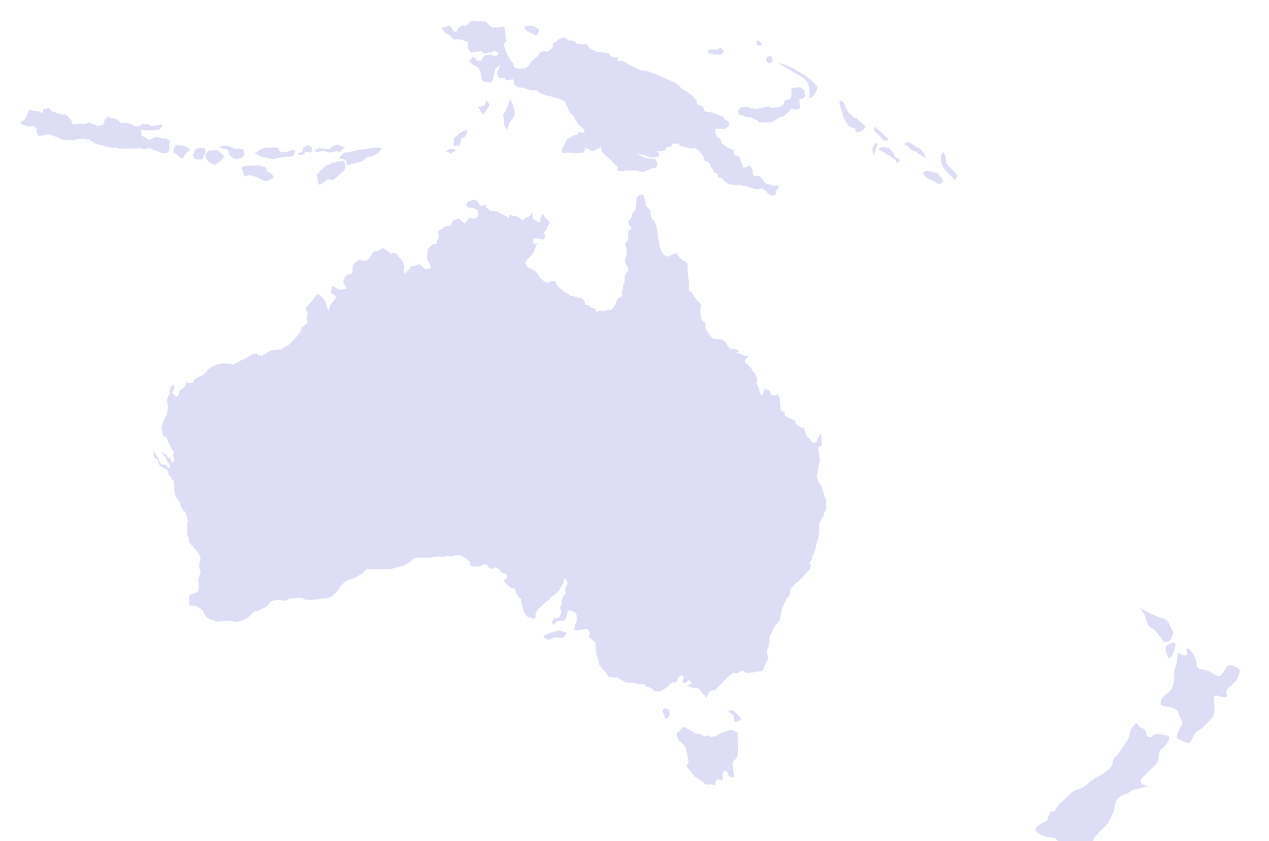- Conflict management

Africa

South Africa

- Traits
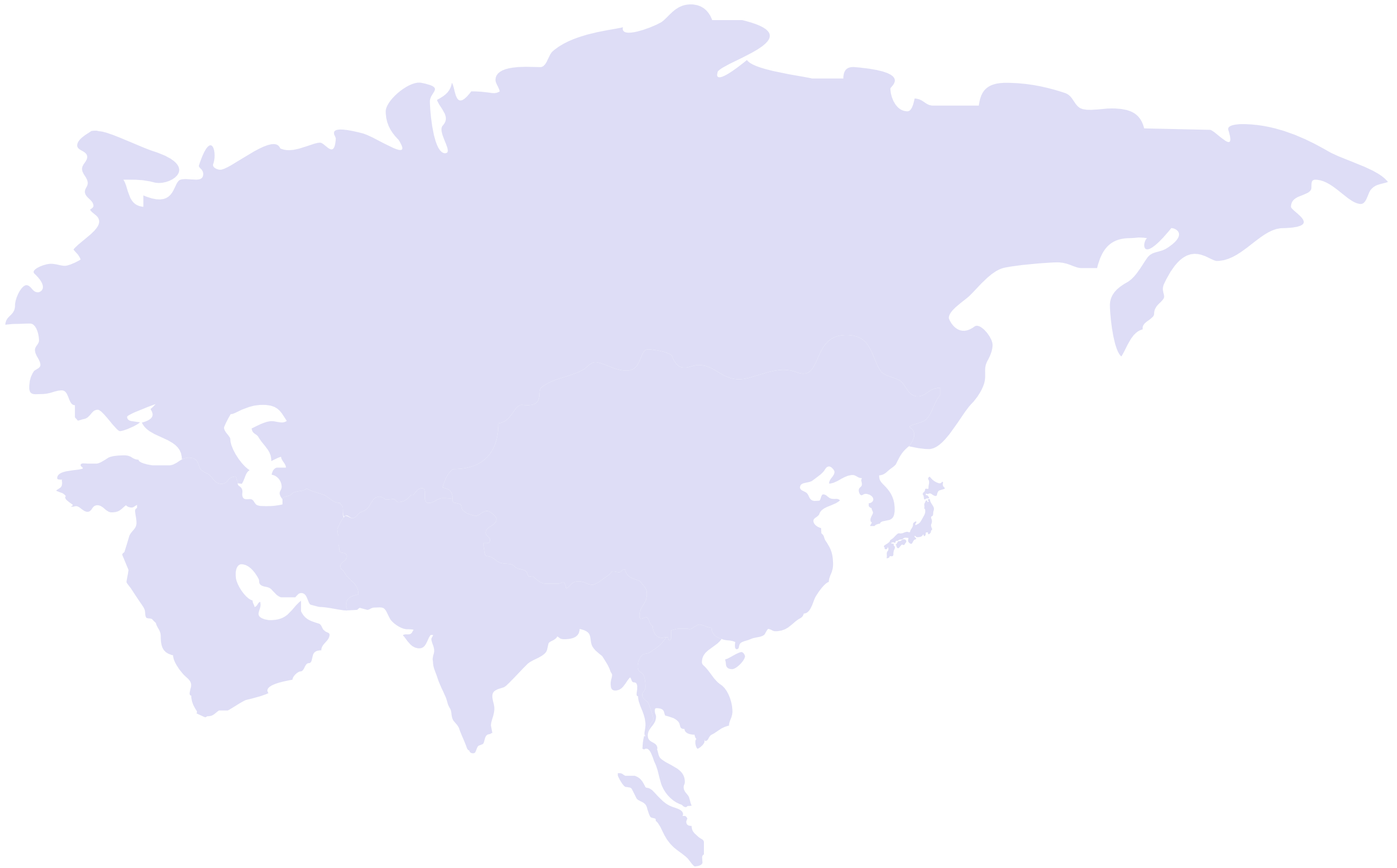- Organisational behaviour
- Job outcomes

Australia

Australia

- Fair and transparent
- Feedback
- Follow-up reviews on performance
- Follow-up reviews on employee development

Asia

India
- Appraisal on output
- Reviews on individual competencies

Saudi Arabia
- Performance evaluation
- Appraise individual objectives
- Evaluate general effectiveness

Russia
- Evaluate performance
- Appraise business skills

China
- Reviewing result orientation
- evaluating outcomes of feedback

Singapore
- Identify important factors of employee performance
- Appraise employee intellectual qualities
- Appraise results orientation
- Appraise leadership qualities

Japan
- Appraisal of skills
- Performance monitoring
- Employee attitude

South korea
- Defining feedbacks
- Evaluating team results
- Appraising personality traits
- Employee attitudes
- Maintaining harmony

Philippines
- Performance monitoring
- Employee coaching
- Performance review
- Employee development planning

Malaysia
- 360 degree feedback
- Goal achievements
- Appraising adherence to responsibilities
- Evaluate employee contribution

Turkey
- Problems solving
- Appraise personality traits
- Appraise competencies

3. Nurturing the culture of feedback

Culture, in all its essence needs to come from the top of the hierarchy - whether it is of feedback or any other aspects of organisational behaviour. Thus the most important step towards nurturing a culture of feedback is to drive it from top. As a manager, continuously ask for feedback while giving it too.

The next step is to coach and train the team members on effective feedback. Reiterating my feedback experience narrated in the first chapter, I have learnt that doing is the most efficient way to let employees learn how to give feedback. You could be well prepared - by earnestly maintaining a checklist of everything and ticking them off. But until the team members start participating in honest conversations, these well-laid-out sessions are rendered useless.
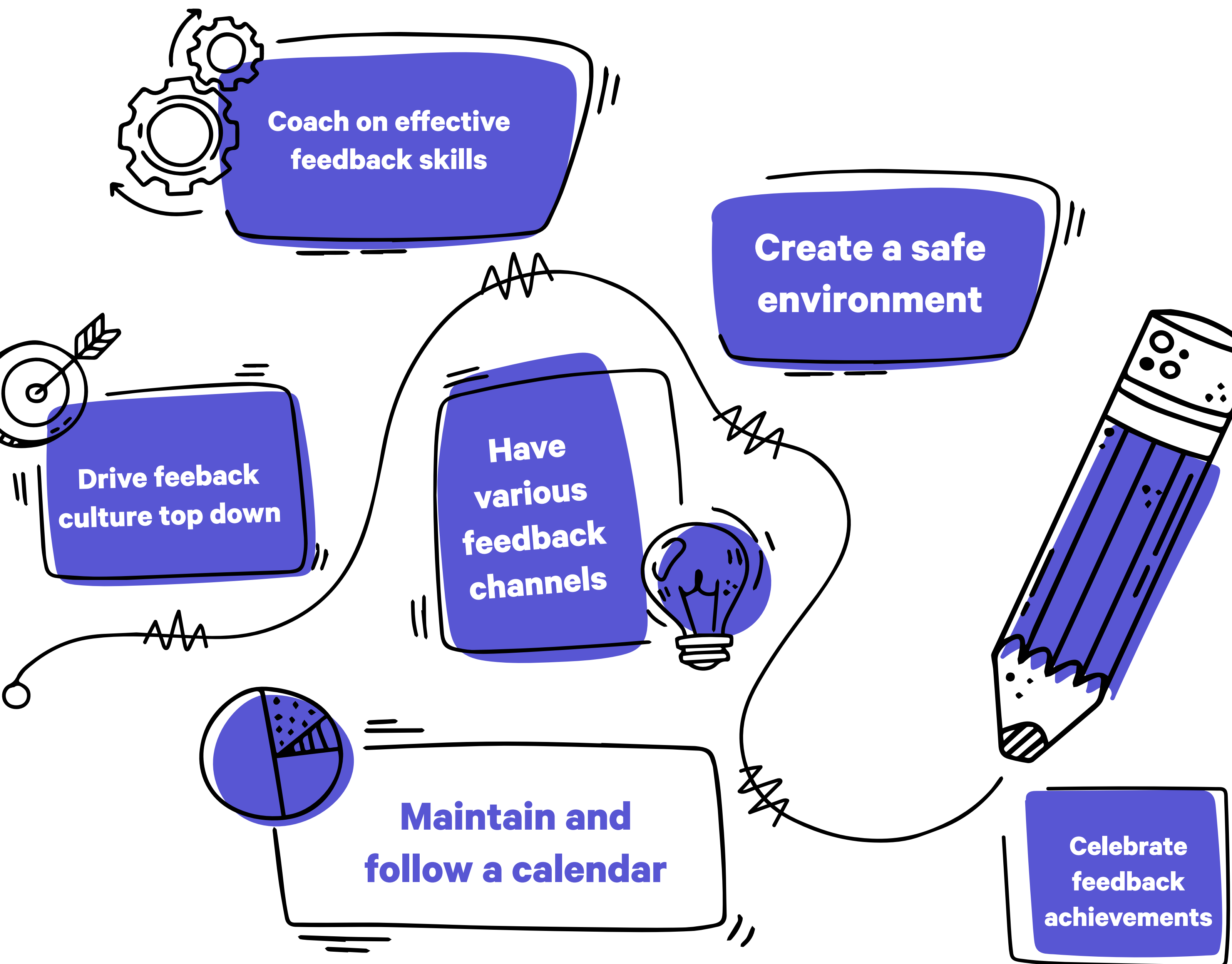
Once the intent and content of the feedback initiative is set, it is now required to create a safe environment for employees to share feedback. An environment that assures them that none of their opinions will be faced with retaliation. Now, this is easier said than done. This step is probably the most complicated of steps to achieve a culture of feedback. Creating a psychologically safe environment for employees calls for fundamental changes in how managers and leaders behave, interact and respond to their team members. This would call for leaders to prioritise managerial values like empathy and respect over control and command.

The next step to make feedback freely possible is to spread it across various channels. Make it convenient for every employee demographic - whether mobile, web or a physical medium and team level or individual level. Have a mix of feedback channels like surveys, employee pulse, feedback on initiatives, one on ones, team feedback, peer to peer, social media, HR touchpoints and suggestion boxes.

Microsoft, in addition to regular team and one-on-one feedback sessions have company-wide anonymous polls on every major strategic decision they take to collect their employee sentiments.

Plan a high frequency for feedback opportunities and follow the schedule ardently. Each mode of feedback might require different periodicity - thus maintaining a calendar can help keep it regular and ongoing.

There might be many parties interested in how the 'feedback' initiative is turning out - especially the leadership. Celebrate best practices and great outcomes from these sessions continuously. Build schedules to report and communicate the achieved results as an outcome of the feedback to the leadership and announce it on the office intranet.

Coach on effective feedback skills

Create a safe environment

Drive feeback culture top down

Have various feedback channels

Maintain and follow a calendar

Celebrate feedback achievements

4. Implementing feedback system

While implementing a feedback system, it is important to decipher the following aspects of it:

1. What are the instances when feedback will be taken?

2. Where do these feedback sessions need to be held?

3. Who is going to take ownership of these feedback sessions?

This chapter elaborates on each of these aspects.

4.1 What are the instances when feedback will be taken?

Timing is probably one of the most important factors to receive the most effective feedback - feedback that can bring in high impact. Getting feedback too soon or too late both may not serve this purpose and 'timings' are highly correlated to the context of feedback.

Let me elaborate. Work related feedback needs to be direly collected in real time to ensure that the work is completed within the desired scope and employee efforts don't go futile. Even though managers can choose the most effective mode of collecting this feedback - whether in person or over email - these need to be timed very close to work allocation.

Similarly, quarterly performance reviews have to be timed in such a manner that during the meeting, both retrospection of the bygone quarter can be made as well as the action plan for the upcoming quarter can be laid down. With such a well timed session, employees get sufficient runway to scale up before the next quarter.

> "quarterly performance reviews have to be timed in such a manner that during the meeting, both retrospection of the bygone quarter can be made as well as the action plan for the upcoming quarter can be laid down."

In November 2019, Sundar Pichai announced an end to an all-hands meet that its founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin had been holding since 1999 called TGIFSs, that originally was to express concerns and discuss topics openly and freely with management. With the new expanse of Google employees, TGIFs had lost its purpose - different employee cohorts came in with heterogeneous views of the meeting. Simply put, it was impossible to manage their expectations. TGIFs were replaced by small team discussions that were set up for feedback on the changes.

In my experience too, it is important to make feedback a part of our daily work allows us to improve in real time rather than as a larger event. That said, as it is important to keep reinforcing the right expectation and delivery, I still opt for periodic reviews or feedback discussions for recap and planning.

4.2 The venue of feedback

Depending on the nature of the content, emphasis needs to be paid on where the feedback is given.
For instance, if as a manager you have worked on a presentation and need feedback from the team during a mock run, then a group feedback works. At the same time, if it is a performance review meeting then definitely it has to be done in a closed room one-on-one.

There indeed exists some group feedback exercises that focus on creating an open culture in the team. These aim at getting the team members together in a room and allowing them to openly discuss the positives and improvements about one another's work. This can be time consuming in bigger teams and for it to be a success, it needs to be moderated very well.

Be it one-on-one or a group feedback session, it is important that the surrounding or the venue of the feedback activity is well selected. If it is a closed room, it needs to be opaque to some extent so that if the discussion gets intense the gestures are not seen outside and not left to interpretation from onlookers. It is best to ensure sound proofing as well.
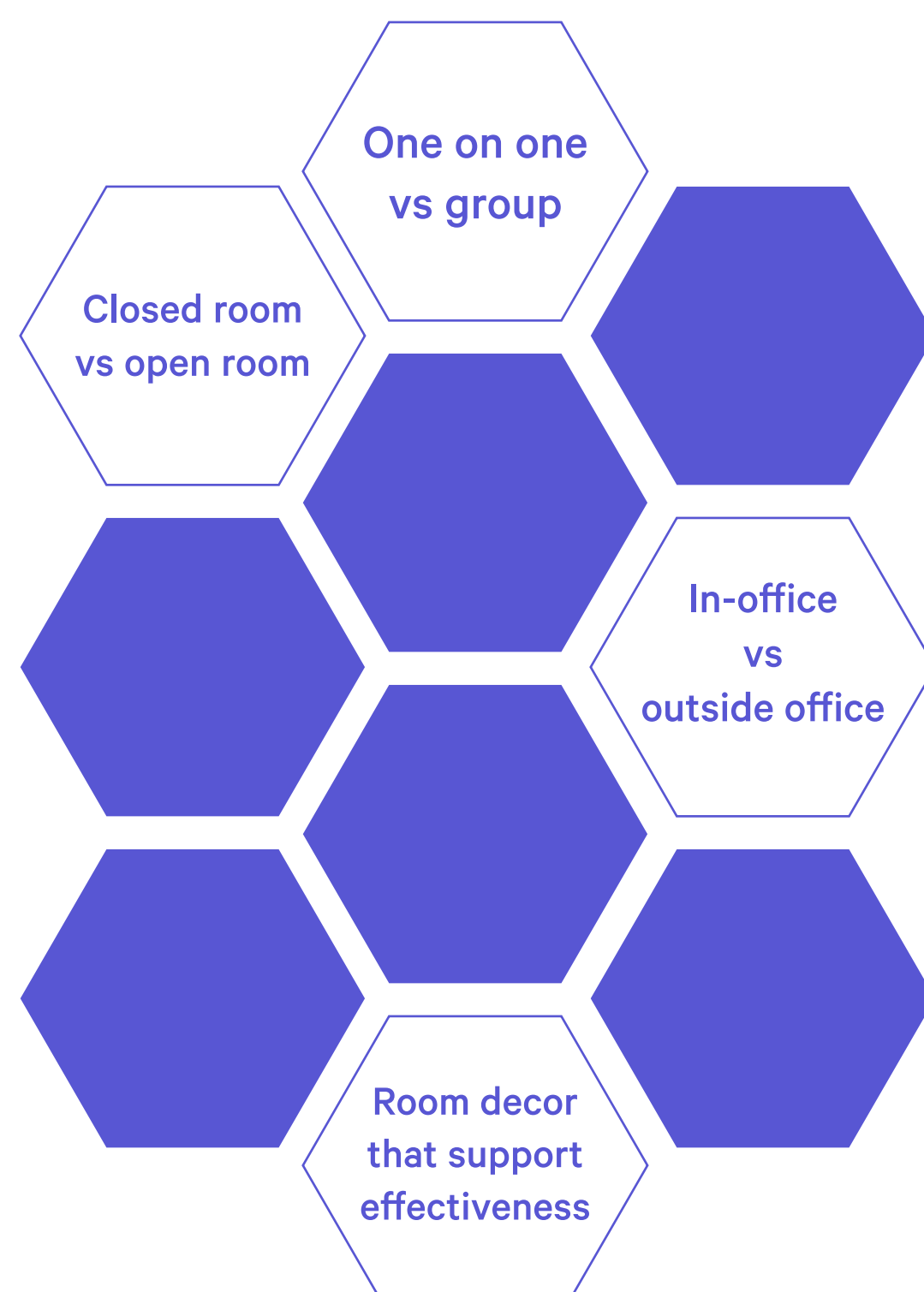
> " it is important that the surrounding or the venue of the feedback activity is well selected – must be a closed room, opaque to some extent so that if the discussion gets intense the gestures are not seen outside and not left to interpretation from onlookers."

Depending on the relationship between the feedback provider and the receiver, the manager can even opt out of formal closed room discussions. These sessions could even be done by stepping out for a coffee or a lunch. In such venues, what is important though, is that the privacy of feedback is maintained. Ensure that no sensitive information is called out loud while indulging in a feedback session in public spaces.

Décor of the room (if allocated for feedback) can also be worked upon. We have a lot of scope of making the meeting rooms play its part, considering the growing focus on having lively workplaces.

Choice of venue for feedback

One on one vs group

Closed room vs open room

In-office vs outside office

Room decor that support effectiveness

4.3 The onus of feedback

While I enjoy the benefit of an open and collaborative culture in my team, I strongly advocate the concept of 360 degree or peer to peer feedback. Though we managed to create this feedback-efficient culture in my team, an average workplace ecosystem does not facilitate open feedback. Feedback generally revolves around managers giving feedback to their teams.

The renowned manager survey of 13 questions that Google asks its employees has been pivotal in collecting feedback from employees about their managers.

By simply introducing skip-level meetings, team members are given the option to share feedback about the manager. The Skip system might alone not give managers the entire perspective of what they are doing right and wrong. This is where 360 degree feedback brings all the details and useful inputs for improvement - where one can even learn from internal and external customer feedback.

> 360 degree feedback brings in complete details and useful inputs to improvement - where one can even learn from internal and external customer feedback.

Going beyond the four walls of manager feedback

Though ultimately managers need to own up the feedback culture in their teams, feedback needs to transcend them. Following are a few critical questions to be asked to understand how inclusive the feedback culture is:

1. What are the steps taken to avoid conscious and unconscious perception biases that could creep into feedback discussion?

2. How do you leverage data and supporting instances to overcome these biases?

3. What processes are used to collect input/feedback to help the manager understand the whole view of the employee : from parties other than themselves?

4. Is it open ended comments or ratings? Do you require both positive and "opportunity" comments/ratings?

5. How do you cope with the challenges of getting valid and reliable feedback from parties other than the manager?

5. Conclusion

Microsoft Chief People Officer Kathleen Hogan in 2013 claimed to have quashed its earlier "stack-ranking" system and moved on to a series of employee connect or feedback sessions. Managers now got to emphasize on providing learning, development and collaboration opportunities to the employees - over and above performance metrics.
Thus, the need to continuously learn, leverage and execute towards excellence is important from both the individual and organisational standpoint while implementing feedback. Learning from past mistakes, experiences and introspection hence has become a tool that contributes to new ideas.

But for any of this to make sense or add value, the manner of execution is prime. Before getting into any meeting I always introspect- what do I want this person to take away from this meeting?

The answer to this question gives me key insights into the aspects of intended knowledge transfer or desired outcomes of the discussion. It also enlightens me of the fact that all of these intents would fail if the delivery time, manner and execution is not catered to.
And I remember that,

> "you will be remembered for what you said,
>
> way you said and when you said - so better do it right"

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If a phrase could connote the greatest learning of the 19 years of my HR experience, it would be 'the necessity of creating strong and honest relationships'.

I've almost always assumed two different roles during my career - my HR practitioner role for the organisation and as the manager of my own team. These roles lead me into innumerous closed-room discussions - some heart warming, some heart wrenching, some easy and some extremely difficult. But I believe that all of them were vital building blocks to a balanced relationship both the employer as well as the employee yearned to achieve.

These notes are valuable extracts from that journey that taught me the value of earnest feedback and the empathy that it ensues. I believe the right feedback, at the right time and with the right content is a powerful tool for advancement and growth -both for the employee as well as the employer.

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