

Feedback as a success factor for self-managing organizations

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Purpose and theoretical background

Approaches to, methods for, and experiments with self-managing organizations are becoming more frequent in today's world of work. Oftentimes, these come with high expectations and marketing promises regarding survival and success in a VUCA world (Bernstein et al., 2016). According to Lee and Edmondson (2017), self-managing organizations are based on a radical decentralization of authority and responsibility and the replacement of traditional hierarchical structures with another formal system. Practical approaches to self-managing organizations include Holacracy (Robertson, 2015), Sociocracy and Sociocracy 3.0 (Endenburg, 1998; R  ther, 2010), Teal organizations (Laloux, 2014), and collegial leadership (Oestereich & Schr  der, 2017). One trend driving the search for less-hierarchical organizations is the rise of knowledge-based work (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). An implication of knowledge work is that no single individual – and in many cases, especially not someone in a hierarchically superior position – has the necessary expertise to solve the organization's challenges by themselves. Successful knowledge work typically depends on the collaboration of many individuals at all organizational levels. As promising as self-organized systems seem for the knowledge economy, converting into one is not trivial (Bauer et al., 2019) and depends on many success factors. In this paper, we aim to look at feedback culture as a potentially crucial success factor for self-managing organizations. Critical and specific feedback from the work environment seems to be elementary in order for employees to reflect on and, if necessary, improve their work. While in hierarchical organizations the task of giving feedback is typically a management responsibility, it is unclear how self-managing organizations deal with this challenge. In this paper, we therefore explore how feedback is being practiced in self-managing organizations and its role as a success factor.

Feedback can create transparency as to which behaviors and skills are particularly useful, and which are more likely to be perceived as hindering the common task. In addition, feedback provides security for future collaboration and reveals possible blind spots (London, 2003). Feedback can be differentiated as strength-oriented (positive) or weakness-oriented (negative/critical) feedback. The former is primarily concerned with expressing praise and appreciation and affirming positive qualities.

The latter's focus is on mistakes or potential for development. Whether strength-focused or weakness-focused feedback is ideal for employees' development is a matter of controversy (Buckingham & Goodall, 2019). Kegan and Lahey (2016) postulated that people only learn transformatively at the edge of their comfort zone – in the so-called growth zone. Accordingly, identifying weaknesses offers the key to growth, both for the individual and for the organization (Kegan & Lahey 2016). For this to work in organizations and for employees to learn and develop through feedback, a feedback-friendly culture is necessary (London & Smither, 2002), where mistakes are not being used against people. Baker et al. (2013) presented three interacting elements (learning continuum, psychological safety, and dialogue) that contribute significantly to a feedback-friendly culture. Based on this, it is reasonable to assume that learning feedback skills is an aspect of transformative development in the sense of personal growth and/or challenging one's own beliefs and thinking (Kegan 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009). I.e., feedback might not only be a driver for individual development, but transformative development might also be necessary for proficient feedback skills.

Given the complexity around, but also the huge importance of feedback and feedback culture in traditional organizations, we assume that both are equally, if not more relevant in self-managing organizations. However, neither scientific nor practitioner-oriented literature on self-managing organizations seems to put a lot of emphasis on feedback. In this paper, we therefore want to explore the following research question: "What role do feedback and feedback culture play in self-managing organizations?"

Methods

To investigate the above research question, we chose the multiple case study approach according to Yin (2003). This approach is suitable for examining previously under-researched complex phenomena in their context. The advantage of a multiple study is that the findings can be critically examined by analyzing similarities and differences between cases (Yin, 2003). The following four cases form the data basis of our case study, consisting of two self-managing companies and two self-managing units (team/department) within larger organizations. The companies and teams were recruited by direct inquiry and with the help of the personal network of the first author. Table 1 gives an overview of the four cases.

Table 1 Description of the four cases

	Case A	Case B	Case C	Case D
Type of method for self-organization	Holacracy	Sociocracy 2.0	self-created form	Holacracy
Transformation took place in:	2018	2020	2019	2019
Size	80 employee	35 employees	13 employees	70 employees
Object of observation	Company	Company	Team	Departement
Area of business	Software Solutions	Innovation and transformation services	back office of operational sales; Logistics	Sourcing, Recruiting and Talents Departement; Transportation
Data collected	6 Interviews 2 non-participant observations 2 documents	6 Interviews 2 non-participant observations 2 documents	4 Interviews 1 document	6 Interviews 1 document

Case A constitutes a company employing approximately 80 people and providing software solutions. After a period of rapid growth, in 2018 the organizational form *Holacracy* was introduced company wide. Case B is a company that provides innovation and transformation services and employs about 35 people. From its foundation in 2013 they loosely employed principles of Sociocracy and later switched in 2020 to a more codified form based on *Sociocracy 3.0*. Case C consists of a team of 13 people in the back office of operational sales within a larger (non-self-managing) logistics organization. In 2019, they switched to a self-created form of self-managing organization. The department at Case D (also part of a larger non-self-managing transportation company) employs around 70 people spread across four locations. The team was completely reorganized at the beginning of 2019 and has been working in the form of a *Holacracy* since then.

The data was collected online between January 11 and February 12, 2021. A total of 22 interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, were conducted across all four cases. One episodic interview (Flick, 2016) was conducted per case with a person who could provide information about the (feedback) culture and feedback practices, followed by 4-5 semi-standardized interviews (Helfferich, 2011) with employees about their feedback experiences. For Case A and B, two non-participant observations of feedback rounds were conducted. In addition, individual documents (feedback guidelines, training documents, mindset analysis) were examined.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim (Kuckartz, 2018) and analyzed using an online software (MaxQDA). We used Kuckartz's method of qualitative content analysis (2018), where categories are formed inductively. In the first step of the qualitative content analysis, the initiating text work, central text passages were marked, and memos were written. This was partly already done during the transcription. In addition, all 22 transcripts were carefully read through. In a further step, categories were developed step by step. After the execution of the first step, the main categories were deductively created based on the existing guideline and the transcripts. Inductive in vivo codes (translatable as natural codes; Strauss, Hildenbrand & Hildenbrand, 1994) were formed on the text and assigned to the main categories. In a further step, the in vivo codes were clustered and combined into sub- or supercategories. This stepwise iterative procedure was repeated until the

final category system was available. The entire data material was then coded with the differentiated category system. A total of 954 codes were assigned. In the first step of the actual analysis, the four cases were evaluated as a whole (cross-case analysis), then the cases were analyzed individually (within-case analysis) and finally we compared Case A and B directly.

Results

Our findings indicate that feedback is a critical factor for the success of self-managing organizations. We identified three levels at which feedback can become visible and use these levels to portrait and compare all four cases.

Where to start? Feedback viewed from three different levels

Feedback in organizations can be viewed from three levels - namely micro, meso and a macro level. Micro refers to the personal level, meso to the level of tools, practices and instruments, and macro to the organizational culture. For each level, we were able to identify several factors that are relevant to the success of feedback in self-managing organizations. For this paper, we will highlight one significant factor per level.

At the micro level, the *personal attitude toward feedback* is important. This sounds very trivial, but it is crucial. Feedback should therefore not be seen as an attack on one's person. Rather, it should be seen as something that helps individuals, and also the company, to uncover blind spots and develop further. Clearly, this attitude also means that one is aware of the importance of actively giving and requesting feedback, regardless of the status of the feedback giver or receiver. *"There is no longer a boss, and I cannot assume that someone else will give feedback to my colleague, but either I have to do it myself or no one else will."* (A4, pos. 136). Few individuals reported proactively giving feedback and then, in that case, asking the person first if they could give feedback. Individuals who do not actively solicit feedback are also less likely to receive feedback in a self-managed organization, according to the data. *"The situation is not yet satisfactory for many I think because it requires being a person who proactively approaches others for feedback."* (D3, pos.

92) In addition, the attitude is said to be that feedback is seen as a gift to do with as one pleases: *"It's a gift, and a gift can be stirred away."* (B4, pos. 25). This also includes not justifying or commenting on feedback: *"It's also the top thing in the whole company culture, always just accept feedback. It is also not appreciated to justify feedback"* (B2, pos. 29).

From the meso level, feedback requires a certain *systematic approach and created frameworks* so that feedback is regularly trained and thus becomes a routine. Accordingly, implicit and explicit frameworks are needed - be it a feedback session or a feedback tool. *"If you don't create a framework with structure, [...] then you're probably not giving feedback. When I see you casually, I can't say, 'by the way, what you did there bothered me. No one does that, it's uncomfortable."* (B4, pos. 13). Whereas if you create a framework for that, then it becomes comforting.

These points lead to the macro level, because for feedback to flow in all directions and the tools and instruments being used, the appropriate culture is needed - a *learning and feedback culture*. This culture, in turn, can only co-exist with a foundation of trust and a degree of psychological safety. *"One of the most important things for me is trust, no matter who is giving you the feedback, that you know that your membership on the team is not in jeopardy or worse your job is in jeopardy."* (C2, pos. 71). It is this feedback culture that must become the norm and a matter of course in a self-managing organization. *"Achieving that culture, I think that's really the big challenge. We are constantly working on it, but it is a relatively long road."* (D4, pos. 21)

As our results show, feedback should be viewed from three angles: All three levels seem important for the functioning of feedback in a self-managing organization. These three levels are interlocked like in a gear wheel – if something changes in one place, it probably has an effect on another level. You can start at any level - but the data suggests that implementing tools (meso) without the right personal mindset (micro) or feedback culture (macro) is unlikely to lead to an effective outcome.

Whose job is feedback, anyway?

In a self-managed organization, leadership tasks are distributed among several people, which is why the classic role of the superior person is eliminated – a reference person who almost automatically gives you feedback. Who is now to compensate for this role? From the view of the meso level, the understanding of roles with explicit and implicit hierarchical relationships is therefore particularly important. Because in a self-managed organization, it seems even more important that the team members give each other feedback, *"because there is no longer a boss and I cannot assume that someone else will give my colleague feedback, but either I have to do it myself, otherwise no one will"* (A4, pos. 136). Although flat hierarchies are practiced in self-managed organizations and classic superiors are no longer relevant, both implicit and explicit hierarchies still exist, which have an impact on feedback behavior. *"It is often underestimated. Self-managed organization does not mean that all hierarchy is gone [...]. Accordingly, this already has a certain impact on feedback"* (D4, pos. 51). Accordingly, many team members do not dare to give honest and critical feedback 'upwards' because they fear negative consequences. *"That's still a bit of the old mindset in the sense of: if I give the boss bad feedback, then I'll get it back somewhere down the line."* (D4, pos. 53). And on the other hand, feedback from 'below' is weighted less. In addition, it is challenging for people like the former leader or someone in a leading role to give feedback. The question here is 'When is it still feedback and when is it already leadership? Because if that person is constantly giving feedback from their leading role *"we're back in the hierarchy really quickly, always the lead link [author's remark: the "lead link" is a specific role within the Holacracy framework] giving feedback. That's why I don't always give feedback there"* (D2, pos. 81).

The difficulty in self-managed organization is that the responsibility should not be with anyone specifically and yet with each individual. How much should be fixed and how much should be self-managed in those organizations? The interviewees agreed: the responsibility for the feedback culture lies with no one specifically and yet with everyone at the same time. *"In the holacracy? The responsibility? Yes actually with everyone. Everybody is responsible for themselves, everybody has to look for themselves, it can not be some role that says 'you have to give feedback to each other'."* (A4, pos. 140) The self-managed organizations have come to the conclusion:

We are self-managed organizations, and if someone wants something, then he or she is in the fetching debt and should demand it. In a self-managed organization, one is dependent on feedback always happening: *"[...] for me the idea of a perfect self-managed organization would actually be ongoing feedback, ongoing development, ongoing learning, which happens within the organization."* (D4, pos. 3)

The feedback culture must become the norm and a matter of course in a self-managed organization. *"It is a learning process. An absolute learning process that it becomes natural that we give each other feedback. [...] But that doesn't work overnight, it's an incredibly difficult process where we're all in it."* (D5, pos. 13)

How does the practice of feedback differ?

In order to see what these findings mean within the four cases, the results per case are briefly summarized in the following. At Case A, the topic of feedback is described as a *"tender plant"* (A1, Pos. 56). For most of the company, feedback appears not to be seen as important or even critical. However, there is a small interest group that regularly discusses the issue. When the lack of a positive feedback culture became an issue three years ago, their initial assumption was that critical feedback had been largely missing since the introduction of Holacracy - until they realized that it hadn't been done before either. *"[Our problem with] feedback has nothing to do with Holacracy. [...] Holacracy just points it out now, it's a catalyst."* (A1, Pos. 100).

At Case B, feedback seems to be daily business and giving and asking for feedback frequently is fully embedded in the culture (without having it written down in a document). They are characterized by the fact that feedback is a natural and normal thing for them, therefore they give and ask for feedback extremely often. *"I feel like everyone is really receptive to feedback from my perspective, and everyone really values it as well"* (B1, Pos. 33). The positive feedback culture has not only been practiced since the changeover to sociocracy, it already existed before.

In Case C, there seems to be an awareness of the importance of feedback, but collaboratively defined feedback rules are not yet implemented everywhere. Interviewees stated that the high need for harmony and consensus sometimes hinders them from giving critical feedback. *"That's a special characteristic, we're very consensus-oriented in the company. We want to please everyone, and we don't want*

to step on anyone's toes. Then that's a little bit at odds with, I'll give you feedback, and it can be critical." (C1, Pos. 16). Nevertheless, if you want feedback, you can ask for it, and this works relatively well, according to the interviewees.

In Case D, some rudimentary training on feedback was provided as part of the change process. However, it appears that there is still no common understanding of feedback among the employees and feedback is still characterized by a hierarchical mindset. Interviewees characterized their team as *"we are too nice to each other"*. No one seems to want to hurt anyone or say anything bad. Accordingly, feedback tends to be appreciative rather than critical: *"Sometimes work colleagues tell you, 'hey that was cool', but again it's more of an appreciation thing, it's less of a feedback thing. Very little of that feedback will make me improve or make me do it differently next time."* (D1, pos. 15).

Comparing the four cases across the three levels

For a better understanding, the four cases are considered in relation to the micro, meso and macro levels. The Description in Table 2 gives a brief overview of the difference in and between the cases. Case A and B were specifically looked at and compared below. Cases C and D are not described further than what can be seen in table 2.

Table 2 Description of the four cases regarding the three levels

	Case A	Case B	Case C	Case D
Micro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For most of the company, feedback appears not to be seen as important or even critical - Feedback seems like something that has to be avoided (afraid of the reaction, showing of weakness) - Small interest group that discusses the topic feedback regularly, the rest of the company does not prioritize the issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very strong self-reflection and openness to feedback - High receptivity to feedback and pronounced willingness to give feedback - Feedback seems to be the most normal and natural thing for the employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - It appears that employees are receptive to feedback - However, critical feedback does not seem to be equally appreciated by everyone - Willingness to provide feedback upon request seems to be present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The attitude towards feedback seems to be "if you want feedback, you should ask for it yourself"
Meso	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training or education on feedback conducted, but low participation (small interest group) - Feedback vessels exist, but are hardly used - Hierarchy still plays a strong role and prevents critical feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actively practiced and used feedback vessels - Feedback is given on a daily basis (in feedback rounds or in an occasional way) - Feedback is given in all (hierarchical) directions - No training or education on feedback conducted - No feedback rules defined 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training or education on feedback conducted - Feedback rules were defined and are tried to practice - created feedback vessels are hardly used anymore. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training or education on feedback conducted - 360° feedback is available, but the evaluation is still too positive - Hierarchy still plays a strong role and prevents critical feedback
Macro	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - different evaluation of feedback culture in the company (no common understanding of feedback culture and its importance (no development perspective on feedback) - Fear of hurting employees (low psychological safety)- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feedback is already given to each other during the recruitment assessment - Common understanding of feedback culture and its importance (development perspective on feedback) seems to exist - Psychological security to a large extent available - Risk: too much positive feedback is not authentic any more 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High consensus orientation and need for harmony (of the team and the entire company) - Foundation of trust was already in place before transformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No common understanding of feedback culture and its importance (no development perspective on feedback) - Low existing culture of failure and feedback in the organization influences the culture in the department - Highly pronounced need for harmony
Conclusion	Seems to fail mainly at micro and macro levels	Relevant factors appear to be present at all three levels	It appears that something is present at all levels in small proportions.	Fails mainly at micro and macro levels

How is feedback crucial for self-managing organizations?

Contrasting Case A and B

In order to put the spotlight on the relevance of feedback for a functioning self-managing organization, we specifically looked at and compared Case A and Case B. We chose these two cases, because they seem to represent opposites. Whereas in Case A, a lack of a feedback culture is identified as a serious problem, in Case B feedback is very deeply anchored in the culture since the company's founding. How do these two cases differ in terms of their personal attitudes, tools, instruments and practices and their organizational culture?

In Case A, feedback seems to fail primarily at the micro and macro levels. As one sees, the people involved are trying to bring numerous vessels for feedback (meso) to life. However, anchoring these in the organization fails because too few participate and show interest. Feedback is something they neither want to receive nor they want to give it. *"Feedback is not a gift."* (A1, pos. 92), as the interviewees put it. In addition, it seems that they do not prioritize feedback, and if feedback is not consciously and actively given space and time, it fails. "I feel like it's not because of the skills, they just don't care. They don't find it relevant. They're under pressure, and it's something they don't prioritize (A1, pos. 1). Moreover, it seems that giving feedback is associated with showing weakness, making oneself vulnerable, and hurting others. Feedback carries a potential for conflict that employees prefer to avoid. *"There's a mindset behind it, that you want to protect yourself and be affectionate with each other. That leads to not wanting to stand on each other's feet and not wanting to hurt anyone."* (A1, pos. 32). Put simply, the sum of employees' personal attitudes forms the company's culture. Since, for the most part, every individual in the company does not see the importance of feedback and does not have the appropriate attitude towards feedback, the feedback culture is not being practiced.

In Case B, it appears that the factors relevant to feedback are present at all three levels. At the micro level, there was a high level of receptivity and a pronounced willingness to provide feedback. Feedback is clearly seen from everyone as a gift. *"Feedback is a gift, and a gift can be stirred away."* (B4, pos. 25). At the meso level, there are vessels every few days where they give each other feedback in a group.

Feedback is modeled by the business partners, and employees are given time during work to personally develop themselves. However, feedback does not work because of the feedback vessels, rather the feedback vessels work because of the attitude of the employees. The driving force for making feedback work for Case B seems to be the people (micro) with the attitude and the nurturing culture (macro) because the space is given to each other. *"I don't know how we would all be if the culture was like no one is allowed to say anything, then even though it suits us as people, we would also back off. That's why I feel like it needs both. Then you raise each other up."* (B1, pos. 75). In contrast to the other cases, Case B did not conduct any training on feedback and did not define any feedback guidelines. This shows that they do not merely write it down, but simply demonstrate and live it out. In addition, the feedback culture and psychological security also seem to be largely in place.

Case B already had a successful feedback culture before Sociocracy was established, it is a fundamental part of the culture, and it also plays an important role in the self-managing organization. This distinguishes case B strongly from the other cases, where the topic only became a present topic after the change to self-managed organization. Only the good atmosphere in the company makes it difficult in part to criticize someone, because there is a fear of being the only one to express criticism. In addition, too much positive feedback can destroy the feedback culture by no longer appearing authentic.

Discussion

In our study we were able to identify and point out the relevance of feedback as well as feedback culture and its role in self-managing organizations. Especially the comparison between the two cases A and B showed that a lack of feedback practice can be an obstacle to self-managing organizations.

Regarding Case A, the lack of communication and feedback culture hinders them from realizing the full potential as a self-managed organization. One obstacle is that many are still personally concerned with the change from the role of the manager to that of an equal employee. An individual who used to report everything to the manager will now keep his feedback to himself. The outdated mindset of "the

manager solves it for me" as well as the attitude that feedback bears the potential for conflict, prevents them from effectively addressing tensions. Addressing these in turn is elementary for the functioning and further development of a self-managed organization. We saw signs that – due to the fact that they do not give each other enough critical feedback for fear of getting in each other's way – separate bubbles exist within the company, which do not communicate sufficiently with each other with regard to the development goals of the organizational form.

Whereas Case B has the advantage that the feedback culture already existed before the transformation, they might now even be more successful as a self-managing organization. The feedback culture enables them to fail and learn fast. Thus, through regular feedback, they can constantly adapt as well as improve themselves, their products or services, and also the company itself. Likewise, the feedback culture has a positive effect on cooperation within the team. The reason for this is that they communicate openly, transparently and speak up promptly about tensions that arise from time to time in any organization. Self-organization, as Case B shows, depends on everyone addressing such tensions, because there is no such thing as a superior who has your back and takes care of everything. Finally, it can be stated that in a self-organization, despite the high focus on the role, teamwork and the functioning of the team are elementary, which is why it is important that employees regularly include the opinion of others in the form of feedback.

While Case B already started out with a highly-developed feedback culture, Case A is in a very different place. With the transition to self-management came the realization (to some) that they don't do feedback properly. It became a relevant issue as a result of the transition, indicating its importance for the functioning of self-management.

As our data show, feedback must be viewed on three integrated levels. Furthermore, we postulate that in self-managing organizations, all three levels are necessary. Classically hierarchical organizations might get by with measures at the meso level such as formalized feedback processes and trainings for supervisors. However, typical for self-managing organizations is precisely their aim to make feedback everyone's responsibility and the abolishment of supervisory roles. Therefore, the

problem cannot only be tackled at the meso level. Particularly in self-managing organizations, it is of little use to only introduce tools (meso) without changing the attitude of the employees (micro) and the culture (macro) of the company.

Our data accordingly show that factors on the micro and macro level seem to be the driving force for feedback to work in self-managing organizations. On the micro level, developing the appropriate attitude and learning feedback skills, as described at the beginning of our paper, can be seen as a form of personal development. In other words, being able to give and receive feedback requires development and personal growth of employees. However, personal growth, in turn, is fostered by receiving feedback. We found this apparent paradox quite intriguing: Feedback enables personal growth, but executing feedback skillfully also requires personal growth. In hierarchical organizations, this problem can be resolved because giving feedback is delegated to superiors, who – at least in theory – might already possess necessary feedback skills as part of their professional and personal development. In self-managing organizations however, such hierarchy is abolished. As Case A prominently showed, this might make it especially difficult to establish a feedback culture “from scratch”. It is our view that this is only possible when all three levels of feedback in organizations are addressed simultaneously and in an interlocking way. A feedback training such as they implemented seemed to be not enough to change individuals’ attitudes and the culture at the whole. It is, as interviewee D4 put it, indeed “a relatively long road”.

Limitations and conclusion

Although we were able to base our findings on four different cases, our study’s sample is still quite limited. Furthermore, it is possible that parts of our findings are not exclusively relevant for self-managing organizations, but also apply in hierarchical organizations. Nevertheless, we believe our data provide some evidence that feedback plays a much more significant role in self-managing organizations. Studying this in a comparative and quantitative research design could be a fruitful opportunity. A longitudinal (probably qualitative or mixed-methods) approach, where these changes can be observed over a period of years would also be interesting.

Another interesting avenue for further research could be to look into the specific content and type of feedback in self-managing organizations, addressing the debate whether positive or negative feedback is more effective.

For self-managing-organizations to be a response to the VUCA world at all, feedback is needed to operate in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous working world. This is because reacting quickly within high uncertainty and ambiguity requires timely feedback. While many organizations seem to be good at collecting and using feedback from outside of the organization, we believe that feedback from within is equally important. Moreover, feedback seems to be significant for self-managed organizations, because there is no longer a single person evaluating the team's performance. The team controls, organizes and leads itself, which is why the team members should always pay attention to the way they work together and give each other feedback. If external structures increasingly fall away, internal structures that provide security and orientation become even more important. It is therefore elementary to adopt or promote an attitude of permanent learning, questioning oneself and personal development with the help of feedback. Feedback, exchange and reflection are necessary so that employees can adapt their own internal structures to the external structure (self-managed organization) over time.

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