



Use Feedback Loops

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Life is constantly communicating – both within and across species. Signaling and responding. Feedback loops provide important information to help organisms and systems appropriately respond to change.

Like clover, strawberries send out “runners” – horizontal stems that bud into new plants while maintaining a relationship with the parent. When nibbled by a rabbit or a deer, warnings are sent through the runners. Adjacent plants use that feedback to actually change their flavor so they are less tasty, and less likely to be eaten.

Feedback loops are also at work in how our bones develop. The individual bones strengthen in response to use. Pressures on the bones provide feedback that signals the body to lay down more calcium and other minerals that make bones strong. That’s why physical exercise is so important. It provides a feedback loop to move calcium from places where it may have been mis-deposited – like in hardening of the arteries – and transfers it to our bones, where we can optimally use it in a healthy way.

In organizations and other social contexts, people tend to fear feedback, equating it with criticism. Or, we focus on measurement – a predetermined set of information indicators, such as media metrics or financial projections. Feedback is different. It is about listening for new signals in the system, things for which you were not looking. It is about having your receptors and antennae open to receive unexpected information, then using it to guide action. This is how innovation comes.

In nature, most feedback loops are short, strong, cyclic, well-tuned between the signaler and receiver... and then implemented immediately. Improving feedback loops in our organizations could be the most high-leverage intervention we could use to catalyze innovation and increase effectiveness.

How can you improve the quality of feedback in the systems that you lead, and put the learning to good use?