SoftEd

AN AGILE BRAINS COMPANY

Feedback-Driven Team Growth

Emotional intelligence, honest conversations, and the ceremonies that keep teams learning

David Mantica

VP & GM, SoftEd North America | October 2026

Feedback-Driven Team Growth

Emotional intelligence, honest conversations, and the ceremonies that keep teams learning

By David Mantica

Published October 2026

Built from the companion slide deck, the delivery transcript of the PMI North Carolina Agile Community of Practice session, and a practitioner reflection contributed after the session.

SoftEd North America
An Agile Brains Company
softed.com
davidm@softed.com

Copyright © 2026 Software Education USA LLC. All rights reserved. Reproduction for internal team use is encouraged. External distribution requires written permission.

Contents

01 Feedback Is a Hard Skill

02 Emotional Intelligence Comes First

03 Delivering Difficult Feedback

04 Embedding Feedback in Ceremonies

05 Psychological Safety

06 A Practitioner Reflection: From the Ice

07 Monday Morning

About the Author

Sources and Further Reading

CHAPTER ONE

Feedback Is a Hard Skill

Not soft. Not optional. The capability that keeps teams learning in high-change environments.

> *Most of us would rather bury conflict in a corner and hope it does not start to stink. In a high-change, high-paced environment, that stance costs you.*

Feedback is the most powerful tool a team has. In environments where the market shifts quarterly and the technology shifts monthly, honest communication about how people are performing is not a soft skill. It is a critical hard skill. Teams that treat it as such outperform the teams that avoid it.

And the hard part is not just delivery. Feedback goes both ways. If all you do is give feedback, you have a major problem. You should be giving feedback when it is needed, and you should be actively asking to receive it as much as you can. Then the goal becomes action. How do you turn what you heard into real work?

What this book covers

You will walk away with four capabilities. Each has its own chapter, built from the practitioner frameworks and peer-reviewed research cited in the session.

1. **Deliver difficult feedback effectively.** A simple four-part structure that keeps the conversation on specific observations, impact, positive intent, and the future.
2. **Apply emotional intelligence to feedback.** Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. The order matters.
3. **Embed continuous feedback loops into team ceremonies.** Daily stand-ups, retrospectives, coaching conversations, continuous improvement cycles.

4. **Create psychological safety for candid conversations.** The research-anchored foundation that makes everything else work.

The reinforcing and the redirecting

Feedback is as much positive reinforcement as it is talking through changes and behaviors that need to shift. Great teams fold both into day-to-day work so the flow stays normal. The person who hears positive feedback three times a week is not knocked sideways when they hear redirecting feedback once.

The one rule that governs everything else

Address the behavior, not the human. Even when you have to terminate someone, even when you have to lay someone off, you maintain the dignity and respect of the person throughout. We lose this in positions of power. Power corrupts, and when it corrupts, we make it all about us and forget the other person is still a person.

THE PREMISE

Difficult feedback is not bad feedback. It is good feedback. It helps us grow. It helps us adapt. And you have to know how to give it, and you have to know how to receive it.

CHAPTER TWO

Emotional Intelligence Comes First

Before feedback is a skill, it is awareness.

> *Speed makes EI more important, not less. In fast-moving environments, you default back to whatever is in your muscle memory. If you have not built the EI muscle, you default to self-interest and aggression. The feedback goes sideways.*

A lot of feedback sessions fail for one reason. The person giving the feedback was not ready to give it. Or the person giving the feedback could not read the cues that the person receiving it was not ready to get it. Just because you have something to share does not make it critically important right now. You need to know the right time.

Goleman's four dimensions

Daniel Goleman popularized the four-domain model of emotional intelligence. The names vary across sources. The content is consistent.

SELF-AWARENESS

You notice what you are feeling and what is driving it. You catch yourself getting defensive. You name it, out loud if you need to, and then you choose your next move. Gut feelings have value, but gut reactions in a feedback moment can also be very poor reactions. The practice is to notice first and respond second.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

You adjust accordingly. If you had a fight at home and you now have to lead a retrospective, you have two choices. Move the retrospective, or spend fifteen minutes resetting yourself. What you do not do is run the retrospective at full emotional load and hope nobody notices.

With any emotional intensity, time and silence help. Breathing helps. The intensity comes from cortisol and adrenaline, and both are fed by heart rate. If you can get your heart rate under control through breathing, you can start managing the anxiety reaction you might have in the middle of conflict and adjust accordingly.

SOCIAL AWARENESS

Get your head out of the sand and read the room. What is really happening with the person across from you? Are they open to this conversation right now, or are they already locked up? Social awareness is not optional in a feedback moment. If you cannot see them, you cannot help them.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

All of us are in the game of managing relationships. Sometimes inspiring, sometimes influencing, sometimes supporting, sometimes providing conflict. All of it rests on trust. The relationship is the vehicle that carries the feedback. If the vehicle is broken, the message does not arrive.

THE PRACTICE

Catch it. Name it. Choose your next move. "I notice I am getting defensive here. Let me take a step back. Say that again, and I will adjust my filter so I am absorbing it rather than reacting to it."

A story about receiving

> **FROM THE SESSION**
>
> One attendee shared a story from a consulting engagement at a Fortune 100 financial services firm. The director and assistant director spent the opening of a meeting telling him and his colleague everything they did not like about how the coaches were working with the teams. He was ready to interrupt and defend. His colleague instead said, "This is great feedback. This tells us exactly where we need to be going next." The whole situation changed. The directors opened up. The meeting turned productive. One line of acknowledgment did it, because it chose relationship management over self-defense.

That is the EI muscle at work. The content of the feedback did not change. The response to it did. And the response changed the room.

CHAPTER THREE

Delivering Difficult Feedback

A simple structure. A discipline that makes it land.

> *Two kinds. Both informal. Both daily. Both matter.*

Reinforcing feedback

Catch people in the act. Authentically thank them. Present someone's accomplishments to a group in a timely, relevant way, and talk about why that habit or that type of work builds value in the system.

Do not treat people like dogs with treats. Authentic reinforcement names what the behavior produced. It is not about you noticing the person. It is about the value the action created and how it affects the people around them. When you give it publicly, it is not about you. It is about them.

Your ceremonies already give you the moments: daily stand-ups, retrospectives, reviews, and quarterly meetings. Awards work if the organization has them. Public reinforcement in a retro works even without an awards program. Use what you have.

Redirecting feedback

Four rules that apply before you say anything.

1. **Ask permission.** "Do you have a moment? I want to talk to you about a few things I have been observing." Even as a manager, you ask.
2. **Set the context so the person is not spinning.** Never say "come to my office at 3:00" with no context. All that does is destroy the person's productivity for the rest of the day.

Try: "I need twenty minutes at 3:00 to talk through a couple of things about the project last week. Nothing mission critical. Does that work?"

3. **Private, not public.** Redirecting feedback happens one-on-one. Reinforcing feedback can be public. Not the reverse.
4. **Specific to the behavior, not the person.** "Dave is not obnoxious because he speaks loudly" is not a redirect. "Dave, your habit of speaking loudly in that meeting drowned out other voices, which reduced the information the team got" is a redirect.

The four-part model

Four parts, in order, short. The structure keeps you honest and keeps the conversation on behavior.

Step	What it is	Example
1. Specific observation	Name the exact behavior you observed, with time and place.	"In yesterday's planning meeting, you interrupted Chris twice before he finished."
2. Impact	Name what the behavior cost. Value lost, not personal offense.	"We stopped hearing from Chris, and we lost the blocker he was about to raise."
3. Positive intent	Name what you want the person to keep doing. You are not asking them to disappear.	"Your judgment is strong. I want your voice in the room, not less of it."
4. Future-focused ask	Name the shift you are asking for, forward in time.	"Pace yourself. Make sure others have finished before you start talking."

Words that destroy a redirect

We are judgy creatures. We judge everything, and we judge everyone but ourselves. Judgment has its place. In a redirecting feedback moment, it does not.

- **Always and never.** Nobody always does anything and nobody never does anything. These words move the conversation from behavior to identity, and the person stops listening.
- **Should.** "You should have known better" is a judgment, not a redirect. Replace it with an observation of what happened and an ask for what you want to see next time.
- **Labels.** "You are a people-pleaser." "You are a gopher." Nobody wants to be labeled. Labels are not behavior. They are identity statements dressed up as feedback.
- **Diagnosed motive.** You are not telekinetic. You do not know why someone did what they did. Ask. Do not assume.

A line about the sociopaths

Roughly two percent of the general working population and about four percent of complex white-collar environments test as having antisocial personality traits. The FBI maintains a behavioral diagnostic on white-collar cases. You will run into it occasionally. The point for feedback practice: 96 to 98 percent of the people across from you are normal humans trying to do their work the best way they know how. Treat them that way.

THE DISCIPLINE

Observe. Impact. Positive intent. Future-focused ask. Behavior, not the human. In private, with permission. Keep it short, keep it specific, and leave the person with something they can act on next week.

CHAPTER FOUR

Embedding Feedback in Ceremonies

You already have the moments. Use them.

> *Daily stand-ups. Retrospectives. Day-to-day coaching. Continuous improvement sessions. Reviews. Quarterly meetings. Each is a feedback loop you already run.*

The daily stand-up

The purpose of the stand-up is not status reporting. It is to optimize the probability that the team will meet the goal, with full visibility of what is going on and the ability to adjust and pivot.

Three practices to try in your next stand-up:

- **Scan for blocker signals.** Ask directly: "Any thoughts? Any challenges? Anything you are seeing or hearing that is slowing us down?"
- **Micro-feedback.** Spend one or two minutes on specific reinforcing feedback for something you saw yesterday. Named, specific, and short.
- **Alignment check.** "Is there anything you are seeing that suggests we are drifting from the goal? Any friction between people I should look into?"

The more comfortable you make the room, the more real information you get. Honesty comes out of safety. The chapter on safety has more.

The retrospective

The most powerful tool an agile team has, and the one most often phoned in.

Four questions carry a retrospective:

1. What did we learn?
2. What should we adjust?
3. What would you do differently next time?
4. Can we commit to one thing we will change this coming week?

The last one is the one most teams skip. A retrospective that produces insight and no commitment produces the same retrospective next week. Commit to one thing. One. Make it visible. Review it next time.

THE PRIME DIRECTIVE

Norm Kerth's Retrospective Prime Directive, from his book *Project Retrospectives* (2001), sets the floor:

> *"Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand."*

Say it out loud at the start of the retrospective. Not as a formality. As a frame. It changes what people are willing to raise.

Coaching as a feedback loop

Coaching is a feedback loop, and most of you reading this are coaches, formally or informally. Coaching goes sideways when you forget what it is not. You are not the person's manager. You are not there to correct behavior. You are not there to manipulate them into the outcome you prefer. You are there to help them see.

A simple five-step rhythm keeps a coaching conversation on track:

1. **Observe.** What is actually happening? Document it so you can refer back.
2. **Propose.** Here is a frame or an angle you may not have considered.
3. **Validate.** Does that match what you are seeing? What is different?
4. **Test.** What small thing could you try this week to see if the frame holds?
5. **Discuss.** What did the test tell us? What is the next move?

You coach what you have lived. People hire coaches because they want to tap into experience the coach actually has. Honest coaches say "I have not been through that one" when they have not. They do not pretend.

Continuous improvement

Continuous improvement is a feedback loop at the system level. Two frameworks dominate practitioner use: PDCA, the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle associated with W. Edwards Deming and the Toyota Production System, and lean startup's Build-Measure-Learn loop.

What matters for feedback practice is simple. You run a change. You measure what happens. You learn from the measurement. You decide whether to adopt, adjust, or abandon. If any of those three steps are missing, you are not doing continuous improvement. You are doing continuous activity.

THE RULE

Reviews are not reviews. Reviews are a great opportunity to provide powerful reinforcing and redirecting feedback at the moment the work is still fresh.

AI as a feedback aid

AI gives you a new tool for feedback: the ability to capture a conversation accurately so you can be fully present in it. You listen hard. The AI captures. Afterward, you present a brief summary with the core actions you will take.

So often, people feel that they provide feedback and it goes into the ether. Did you listen? Did you write any notes? Why did I even talk? A written follow-up that reflects what the person said and names the actions you took as a result closes that loop. Used this way, AI serves the human conversation. It does not replace it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Psychological Safety

Without this, every other skill in this book fails.

> *A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.*

That definition is Amy Edmondson's, from her foundational 1999 paper in *Administrative Science Quarterly*. The paper reshaped team research. Her 2018 book, *The Fearless Organization*, operationalized the research into leader practice and became the standard framework in use today.

> *Edmondson, A.C. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44(2), 350-383. (Peer-reviewed.) Edmondson, A.C. (2018). The Fearless Organization. Wiley. (Practitioner.)*

Why safety matters for feedback

Real growth requires risk. There are three ways to make money in this world. You can inherit it. You can cheat and hope you do not get caught. Or you can manage the crap out of risk, learn, grow, and create value in the process.

The third option is the only one you can build a career on. It only works if you feel safe enough to try things that might not work. The team member who hides mistakes does not learn. The team member who hides disagreements does not sharpen the thinking in the room. The team that confuses silence for alignment ships the wrong thing on time.

Where learning actually happens

Edmondson maps the territory as a two-by-two. Psychological safety on one axis. Standards on the other.



Standards without safety produces anxiety. People perform through fear until they leave. Safety without standards produces comfort. Nothing hurts, and nothing moves. The combination is the point. High safety and high standards together is where great teams live.

> *Framework: Edmondson, A.C. (2018). The Fearless Organization. Wiley.*

Three leader tasks that build safety

Edmondson's practice framework. Deliberate and repeatable. You do these on purpose or they do not happen.

SET THE STAGE

Share expectations and meaning. Consistently remind people of the goal, what you are trying to achieve, and how you are trying to achieve it. When the goal shifts, communicate the why, not just the what.

INVITE PARTICIPATION

"What do you think? Before I set these goals, what are your thoughts? Where do you think we should go? Is anything about this concerning you?" The invitation has to be genuine. People can tell the difference between an invitation and a performance of one in a single meeting.

The flip side: as a participant, you have to accept the adulthood that not every idea you contribute will be adopted. The opportunity to voice it is the point. The guaranteed outcome is not.

RESPOND PRODUCTIVELY

"Thank you. Here is what I will move forward with. Here is what I will not move forward with. Here is why. Here is what I want to table for later." Over time, this is what tells people whether speaking up is safe. One mocked question in a meeting undoes months of invitation.

THE HARD TRUTH

You can do everything in your power to make the environment safe. The person still has to accept the safety. Safety is a two-sided transaction. Ask for feedback on it. "Is there anything stopping you from accepting the safety here?" If they are not safe enough to answer that question, you know your answer.

The emperor's new clothes

If you do not have safety, you get two things from your teams. What they want you to hear, and what they think you want to hear. Neither one is the truth. In the Hans Christian Andersen story, the emperor paraded naked because everybody was too scared to tell him. The child who finally laughed had nothing to lose.

In leadership, you are the emperor. The reality the team sees is the reality that will shape the outcome, whether you ever hear about it or not. Your job is to make it safe enough that someone tells you about the parade before it starts.

CHAPTER SIX

A Practitioner Reflection: From the Ice

A former Team USA ice dancer, now a professional coach, on what two decades of feedback taught her.

This reflection was contributed by a session participant after the PMI North Carolina Agile COP delivery. It is included here in her own voice because her experience brings the frameworks in this book out of the conference room and onto the rink.

PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

One of the biggest lessons I have learned about feedback comes from my experience as both an elite ice dancer on Team USA and now as a professional coach. As an athlete, I received feedback for several hours every day. As I matured, I learned that feedback could be communicated in different ways, and not every approach worked for every person. However, learning to accept constructive criticism, rather than becoming defensive, was essential to my development.

When I transitioned into coaching, I found myself on the other side of that relationship, providing feedback instead of receiving it. There have been plenty of days when I was emotionally drained, stressed, or dealing with personal challenges, but I have trained myself to switch into a professional mindset when I step onto the ice. Families invest their time and money in my coaching experience, and I believe they deserve my full attention, honesty, and professionalism regardless of what I may be experiencing personally.

> *One challenge I have encountered is that not everyone is willing to receive feedback, even when they are specifically paying for it. Recently, I made the difficult decision to stop coaching a student because of ongoing communication challenges with the parent. Despite consistently communicating after lessons, explaining my reasoning, and trying different approaches, the parent was unwilling to accept certain feedback. The situation was frustrating, especially because I take pride in my communication skills and genuinely care about my students' development. I also recognize that I tend to be a people pleaser, so learning to maintain professional boundaries while remaining honest has been an important part of my growth.*
>
> *What I found particularly valuable from the PMI discussion was the emphasis on addressing behaviors rather than attacking the person. Sometimes, simply rephrasing feedback can completely change how someone receives it. I already try to practice this in coaching by redirecting conversations, listening without interrupting, and adjusting my communication style depending on the individual. However, this discussion reminded me that even when feedback is accurate and well-intentioned, the way it is delivered matters just as much.*
>
> *One of the biggest things that I learned from this is the fact that you have to go into every discussion with an open mind and realize that you are not always going to have your way. I also learned that giving honest feedback is essential to growth and learning, and not being able to take feedback the right way can lead to you not learning and being able to grow.*

What her reflection shows

Three threads from this book run through the reflection, and each one is worth naming because they are easier to see in someone else's practice than in your own.

SELF-MANAGEMENT IS A PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINE

"I have trained myself to switch into a professional mindset when I step onto the ice." That is self-management, named directly. It is not a mood. It is a trained habit. The retrospective you lead at 4pm after a hard day works the same way. You switch, because the people in front of you deserve the version of you that showed up for the work.

SAFETY IS A TWO-SIDED TRANSACTION

"Not everyone is willing to receive feedback, even when they are specifically paying for it." Chapter 5 named this. The leader can build the environment. The person has to accept it. When they will not, you have a decision to make. The reflection names what that decision cost: a difficult choice, made for the right reason, to stop coaching a student whose family would not engage. Boundary-setting is part of relationship management, not the opposite of it.

DELIVERY MATTERS AS MUCH AS CONTENT

"Even when feedback is accurate and well-intentioned, the way it is delivered matters just as much." This is the whole premise of the four-part model in Chapter 3. The content and the delivery are not separable. A correct observation delivered poorly produces defensiveness. The same observation framed as behavior, impact, intent, and future produces conversation.

THE TAKEAWAY

The frameworks in this book did not originate in agile ceremonies. They work there because they describe how feedback actually lands in any skilled performance context: on the ice, in the cockpit, in the operating room, in the sprint review. The context changes. The practice does not.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Monday Morning

Five commitments. Pick one for this week.

> *Nothing in this book requires a budget line or a new tool. It requires a change in how you ask, what you say, and how you listen. Here are five places to start.*

Five commitments

1. **Give one piece of reinforcing feedback, by name, this week.** At home or at work. Specific. Named. Not a group thank-you. One person, one observed behavior, one sentence about the value it produced.
2. **Use the four-part model for one hard conversation.** Specific observation. Impact. Positive intent. Future-focused ask. Short. In private. Not when you are activated.
3. **Audit your next retrospective.** Are you soliciting feedback for continuous improvement, or are you running through a format? Did the team commit to one thing to change this coming week? If not, add that step.
4. **Practice pausing.** Five seconds before you respond. Two hours to delay a meeting if you are not ready. Pausing is self-management made visible.
5. **Honestly rate your team's psychological safety.** On a scale of one to ten. If it is below seven, name one of Edmondson's three leader tasks you will start on this month. Set the stage. Invite participation. Respond productively.

The one conversation

You already know which conversation you have been avoiding. The person who needs the redirect. The teammate you keep thanking in your head and never out loud. The retrospective pattern you keep noticing and never raise.

That is the conversation this book is for. Not an abstract one. The specific one you have been postponing. Have it this week.

THE LAST WORD

Feedback is not a review. It is how your team learns. The teams that treat it as a hard skill outperform the teams that treat it as a courtesy. Build the muscle, give the gift, and keep receiving the one you ask for.

ABOUT

About the Author

David Mantica

VP & GENERAL MANAGER, SOFTED NORTH AMERICA

David leads SoftEd North America, a professional training company he acquired and is repositioning around AI and GenAI transformation for enterprise clients. He operates DTM Services LLC, a consulting and coaching practice, and serves as fractional CMO for a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned small business. He is a guest lecturer at Mars Hill University, writes the Better Work Project newsletter on LinkedIn, and hosts regular LinkedIn Live sessions on leadership and AI.

David lives in the Raleigh-Durham area of North Carolina. Connect with him at **linkedin.com/in/david-mantica** or **davidm@softed.com**.

About SoftEd

SoftEd North America, an Agile Brains Company, trains teams and leaders on the practices that keep organizations adaptive. Programs span AI for executives, systems thinking, adaptive leadership, agile transformation, and the human-side skills AI makes more valuable, not less.

Learn more at **softed.com**.

REFERENCES

Sources and Further Reading

The foundational research and the practitioner frameworks drawn on in this book.

Peer-reviewed source

Edmondson, A.C. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383.

Practitioner sources

The models below come from the practitioner literature rather than peer-reviewed journals. Each is widely used and well established in professional practice.

Edmondson, A.C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Wiley. (Operationalizes the 1999 research into leader practice.)

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. Bantam Books. (Four-domain EI model used in Chapter 2.)

Kerth, N.L. (2001). *Project Retrospectives: A Handbook for Team Reviews*. Dorset House. (Origin of the Retrospective Prime Directive.)

Scott, S. (2002). *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*. Berkley. (Honest-conversation practice referenced in Chapter 3.)

Rother, M. (2010). *Toyota Kata: Managing People for Improvement, Adaptiveness and Superior Results*. McGraw-Hill. (PDCA-based continuous improvement cycle referenced in Chapter 4.)

Taleb, N.N. (2007). *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Random House. (Referenced in the session on market feedback and risk.)

Additional source

Session delivery transcript: PMI North Carolina Agile Community of Practice, October 2026. (Direct quotations and session examples drawn from this transcript.)

Practitioner reflection in Chapter 6: contributed in writing by a session participant and included with permission.

FEEDBACK-DRIVEN TEAM GROWTH

Feedback is not a review.

It is how your team learns.

SOFTED | AN AGILE BRAINS COMPANY

softed.com | davidm@softed.com