Google’s doing exactly that. At our 4th Annual Forum, we caught up with Mary Kate Stimmier, People Analytics expert at Google with a PhD in organizational behavior. Stimmier and her team work to understand the entire lifecycle of a “Googler”—from recruitment to compensation to promotions and team dynamics—in order to develop the best possible management system for the tech titan.

As Mary Kate explains, “Every single manager touches every person on their team. And if you can improve how well someone manages, how they take that position of authority and how they provide strategy for their team, then you get happier, healthier, more productive and innovative employees. We asked ourselves, how great would our company be if we had only great managers?” Sounds good, right?

Operating from the premise that the best leaders are the best learners, the People Analytics team decided that what managers really needed in order to improve was the opportunity to get feedback from their team. They designed a platform for regular upward feedback for every manager with a team of three or more people, and thus, the Manager Feedback Survey (MFS) report was born. Twice a year, employees complete an anonymous survey about how their manager performed on specific, actionable items, such as providing career development coaching. Each manager reviews his or her MFS report and reflects on the data, then schedules a conversation with the team to consider the results. Stimmier notes, “We knew it had to be conversational. Managers needed to hear something out of the mouths of the people they work with every day.” Through dialogue with their teams, managers receive not only a tool for better engagement with their reports’ data, but also a space in which to get more actionable feedback items. For example, if a manager is seeing that she is micromanaging, she can say to her team members, “OK, what does that look like? How can I change that?”

The MFS report works not only to improve
managerial style; it also functions as a way to empower employees. The People Analytics team has found that these conversations make it 50% more likely that employees feel heard and believe that their feedback will actually impact their manager’s behavior. Mary Kate elaborates on the impact of the reports: “For a moment once at least every six months, the power barrier is lifted, and people can give the feedback they want to give to their managers confidentially without fear of recourse and open up that communication.”

Mary Kate notes three elements of the MFS that have been critical to the success Google has enjoyed in building their feedback culture. First, it’s normalized. It happens like clockwork every six months, making it a part of the flow of the workplace. Second, it’s conversational, promoting dialogue between managers and their teams. Third, it’s purely developmental. On this aspect, Stimmier notes, “One of the things we don’t do with our manager feedback is use it to affect punitive action or compensation, and we’ve reinforced that time and time again.” Creating this safe space where people can give feedback without worrying about the consequences allows employees to be more honest and realistic in their responses.

This third element of the tool also emphasizes the priority Google places on people. Though the results could probably be quite useful in compensation or promotion decisions, the People Analytics team protects the data in order to secure the purpose of the survey: making better managers. By insisting that the results be purely developmental, the team enables Googlers to focus on learning and growth rather than the results’ impact on their careers and compensation. This method promotes communication and open dialogue.

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Google has enjoyed so much success with the manager platform that they have begun open-sourcing the tool. Currently, the State of California is working with Google to adapt the platform to its organization. Consider adopting some of Google’s recommendations in your own approach to management and feedback.

Key Points

Make it normal
Add clockwork to your feedback process and make it a regular, predictable part of the year. Google has found that this consistency makes the process more comfortable for employees.

Make it conversational
Use the platform to understand how a manager could improve, and then have real, in-person conversations to make the feedback more concrete, more impactful, and more effective.

Make it developmental
Emancipate the tool from evaluative processes, allowing employees to be more comfortable giving feedback and encouraging managers to be more open to receiving it.