

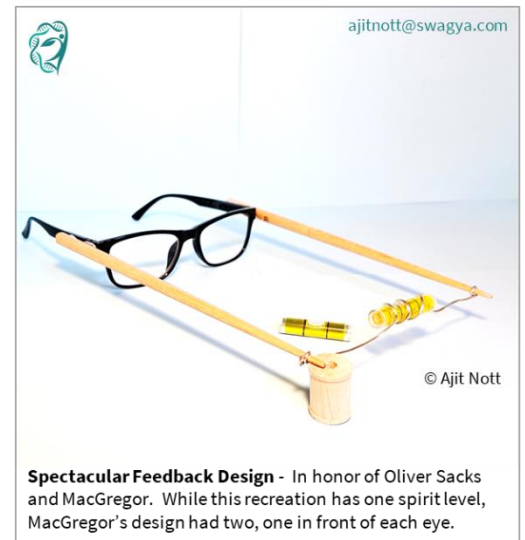
A Spectacular Feedback Design

December 13, 2024 | #003 | All about TLC | 3-minute read

And the gold medal for **spectacular feedback design** goes to...MacGregor.

Oliver Sacks, the incredibly compassionate neurologist, tells the story of MacGregor, an “alert, bright as a button” 93-year-old, who walked into his office one day with a pronounced ‘tilt’. Mr. MacGregor said, “others keep telling me that I lean to the side...a bit more tilt and you’ll topple right over.” He had lost his innate sense of balance due to complications related to Parkinson’s. MacGregor himself was completely unaware of his tilt until Dr. Sacks showed him a video recording of his walk into the office. He was “profoundly shocked” – a common reaction to disconcerting feedback.

After a thoughtful moment he said, “I used to be a carpenter, and we would always use a spirit level to tell whether a surface was level or not.” He reasoned that if he can’t use the spirit levels inside his head, he needed them outside, where he could see them. Brilliant. Soon they had a prototype – spectacles with spirit levels mounted on an extender, a few inches from his eyes. The brilliance of this ‘feedback’ device was that it was ‘accurate’ and ‘always available’. While it was exhausting in the beginning to look at the levels and correct his tilt, with practice it became unconscious, “like keeping an eye on the instrument panel of one’s car.” Every time I read this case; I am in awe of Mr. MacGregor’s ingenious feedback apparatus.



My ‘tilt’ and 3 spirit levels

Back in 2015, I was asked to lead a cross-functional team responsible for delivering a critical product. Before I took over, I was watching this team from the sidelines and ‘knew’ all 23 things they were doing wrong. You guessed it right, the predictable happened. I came in too strong. I think I misread the memo as “influence with authority”! Within a few weeks, I got a call from the Vice President of Research, a gentleman I had been smart enough to make a connection with. He said, and I paraphrase, “Ajit, I know you and you seem like a smart guy. I am hearing several complaints from the team. Looks like you are rubbing people the wrong way. Try to bring them along.” He had many important things to do that day, and I am grateful that he chose to make this call a priority. My ‘tilt’ had been made visible to me, now I needed spirit levels.

After the customary ‘grief’ period (I don’t believe anyone who says they are not rocked by feedback), I enlisted the support of 3 teammates, conveyed my commitment to ‘straighten’ my behavior and asked them to share feedback with me right after every team meeting. This worked like a charm. After 4 months, one of my spirit levels said “Ajit, you can stop now. I do not notice a ‘tilt’ any longer.” This was one of the sweetest things I heard.

So,

- **What is your tilt?**
- **If it continues this way, would it topple you over?**
- **How would you design an accurate, always available spirit level?**

Source: [The man who mistook his wife and other clinical tales by Oliver Sacks](#)

All about TLC – Teams, Leadership & Communication

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with gratitude

-Ajit