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Find the Coaching in Criticism

by Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone

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8+1

Feedback is crucial. That's obvious: It improves performance, develops talent, aligns expectations, solves problems, guides promotion and pay, and boosts the bottom line.

But it's equally obvious that in many organizations, feedback doesn't work. A glance at the stats tells the story: Only 36% of managers complete appraisals thoroughly and on time. In one recent survey, 55% of employees said their most recent performance review had been unfair or inaccurate, and one in four said they dread such evaluations more than anything else in their working lives. When senior HR executives were asked about their biggest performance management challenge, 63% cited managers' inability or unwillingness to have difficult feedback discussions. Coaching and mentoring? Uneven at best.

Most companies try to address these problems by training leaders to give feedback more effectively and more often. That's fine as far as it goes; everyone benefits when managers are better communicators. But improving the skills of the feedback giver won't accomplish much if the receiver isn't able to absorb what is said. It is the receiver who controls whether feedback is let in or kept out, who has to make sense of what he or she is hearing, and who decides whether or not to change. People need to stop treating feedback only as something that must be pushed and instead improve their ability to pull.

For the past 20 years we've coached executives on difficult conversations, and we've found that almost everyone, from new hires to C-suite veterans, struggles with receiving feedback. A critical performance review, a well-intended suggestion, or an oblique comment that may or may not even be feedback ("Well, your presentation was certainly interesting") can spark an emotional reaction, inject tension into the relationship, and bring communication to a halt. But there's good news, too: The skills needed to receive feedback well are distinct and learnable. They include being able to identify and manage the emotions triggered by the feedback and extract value from criticism even when it's poorly delivered.

Why Feedback Doesn't Register

What makes receiving feedback so hard? The process strikes at the tension between two core

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human needs—the need to learn and grow, and the need to be accepted just the way you are. As a result, even a seemingly benign suggestion can leave you feeling angry, anxious, badly treated, or profoundly threatened. A hedge such as “Don’t take this personally” does nothing to soften the blow.

Getting better at receiving feedback starts with understanding and managing those feelings. You might think there are a thousand ways in which feedback can push your buttons, but in fact there are only three.

Truth triggers are set off by the content of the feedback. When assessments or advice seem off base, unhelpful, or simply untrue, you feel indignant, wronged, and exasperated.

Relationship triggers are tripped by the person providing the feedback. Exchanges are often colored by what you believe about the giver (He’s got no credibility on this topic!) and how you feel about your previous interactions (After all I’ve done for you, I get this petty criticism?). So you might reject coaching that you would accept on its merits if it came from someone else.

Identity triggers are all about your relationship with yourself. Whether the feedback is right or wrong, wise or witless, it can be devastating if it causes your sense of who you are to come undone. In such moments you’ll struggle with feeling overwhelmed, defensive, or off balance.

All these responses are natural and reasonable; in some cases they are unavoidable. The solution isn’t to pretend you don’t have them. It’s to recognize what’s happening and learn how to derive benefit from feedback even when it sets off one or more of your triggers.

Six Steps to Becoming a Better Receiver

Taking feedback well is a process of sorting and filtering. You need to understand the other person’s point of view, try on ideas that may at first seem a poor fit, and experiment with different ways of doing things. You also need to discard or shelve critiques that are genuinely misdirected or are not helpful right away. But it’s nearly impossible to do any of those things from inside a triggered response. Instead of ushering you into a nuanced conversation that will help you learn, your triggers prime you to reject, counterattack, or withdraw.

The six steps below will keep you from throwing valuable feedback onto the discard pile or—just as damaging—accepting and acting on comments that you would be better off disregarding. They are presented as advice to the receiver. But, of course, understanding the challenges of receiving feedback helps the giver to be more effective too.

1. Know your tendencies

You’ve been getting feedback all your life, so there are no doubt patterns in how you respond. Do you defend yourself on the facts (“This is plain wrong”), argue about the method of delivery (“You’re really doing this by e-mail?”), or strike back (“You, of all people?”)? Do you smile on the outside but seethe on the inside? Do you get teary or filled with righteous indignation? And what role does the passage of time play? Do you tend to reject feedback in the moment and then step back and consider it over time? Do you accept it all immediately but later decide it’s not valid? Do you agree with it intellectually but have trouble changing your behavior?

When Michael, an advertising executive, hears his boss make an offhand joke about his lack of professionalism, it hits him like a sledgehammer. “I’m flooded with shame,” he told us, “and all my failings rush to mind, as if I’m Googling ‘things wrong with me’ and getting 1.2 million hits, with sponsored ads from my father and my ex. In this state it’s hard to see the feedback at ‘actual size.’” But now that Michael understands his standard operating procedure, he’s able to make better choices about where to go from there: “I can reassure myself that I’m exaggerating, and usually after I sleep on it, I’m in a better place to figure out whether there’s something I can learn.”

2. Disentangle the “what” from the “who”

If the feedback is on target and the advice is wise, it shouldn’t matter who delivers it. But it does. When a relationship trigger is activated, entwining the content of comments with your feelings about the giver (or about how, when, or where she delivered the comments), learning is short-circuited. To

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keep that from happening, you have to work to separate the message from the messenger and then consider both.

Janet, a chemist and a team leader at a pharmaceutical company, received glowing comments from her peers and superiors during her 360-degree review but was surprised by the negative feedback she got from her direct reports. She immediately concluded that the problem was theirs: “I have high standards, and some of them can’t handle that,” she remembers thinking. “They aren’t used to someone holding their feet to the fire.” In this way, she changed the subject from her management style to her subordinates’ competence, preventing her from learning something important about the impact she had on others.

Eventually the penny dropped, Janet says. “I came to see that whether it was their performance problem or my leadership problem, those were not mutually exclusive issues, and both were worth solving.” She was able to disentangle the issues and talk to her team about both. Wisely, she began the conversation with their feedback to her, asking, “What am I doing that’s making things tough? What would improve the situation?”

3. Sort toward coaching

Some feedback is evaluative (“Your rating is a 4”); some is coaching (“Here’s how you can improve”). Everyone needs both. Evaluations tell you where you stand, what to expect, and what is expected of you. Coaching allows you to learn and improve and helps you play at a higher level.

It’s not always easy to distinguish one from the other. When a board member phoned James to suggest that he start the next quarter’s CFO presentation with analyst predictions rather than internal projections, was that intended as a helpful suggestion, or was it a veiled criticism of his usual approach? When in doubt, people tend to assume the worst and to put even well-intentioned coaching into the evaluation bin. Feeling judged is likely to set off your identity triggers, and the resulting anxiety can drown out the opportunity to learn. So whenever possible, sort toward coaching. Work to hear feedback as potentially valuable advice from a fresh perspective rather than as an indictment of how you’ve done things in the past. When James took that approach, “the suggestion became less emotionally loaded,” he says. “I decided to hear it as simply an indication of how that board member might more easily digest quarterly information.”

4. Unpack the feedback

Often it’s not immediately clear whether feedback is valid and useful. So before you accept or reject it, do some analysis to better understand it.

Here’s a hypothetical example. Kara, who’s in sales, is told by Johann, an experienced colleague, that she needs to “be more assertive.” Her reaction might be to reject his advice (“I think I’m pretty assertive already”). Or she might acquiesce (“I really do need to step it up”). But before she decides what to do, she needs to understand what he really means. Does he think she should speak up more often, or just with greater conviction? Should she smile more, or less? Have the confidence to admit she doesn’t know something, or the confidence to pretend she does?

Even the simple advice to “be more assertive” comes from a complex set of observations and judgments that Johann has made while watching Kara in meetings and with customers. Kara needs to dig into the general suggestion and find out what in particular prompted it. What did Johann see her do or fail to do? What did he expect, and what is he worried about? In other words, where is the feedback coming from?

Kara also needs to know where the feedback is going—exactly what Johann wants her to do differently and why. After a clarifying discussion, she might agree that she is less assertive than others on the sales floor but disagree with the idea that she should change. If all her sales heroes are quiet, humble, and deeply curious about customers’ needs, Kara’s view of what it means to be good at sales might look and sound very different from Johann’s *Glengarry Glen Ross* ideal.

When you set aside snap judgments and take time to explore where feedback is coming from and

where it's going, you can enter into a rich, informative conversation about perceived best practices—whether you decide to take the advice or not.

5. Ask for just one thing

Feedback is less likely to set off your emotional triggers if you request it and direct it. So don't wait until your annual performance review. Find opportunities to get bite-size pieces of coaching from a variety of people throughout the year. Don't invite criticism with a big, unfocused question like "Do you have any feedback for me?" Make the process more manageable by asking a colleague, a boss, or a direct report, "What's one thing you see me doing (or failing to do) that holds me back?" That person may name the first behavior that comes to mind or the most important one on his or her list. Either way, you'll get concrete information and can tease out more specifics at your own pace.

Roberto, a fund manager at a financial services firm, found his 360-degree review process overwhelming and confusing. "Eighteen pages of charts and graphs and no ability to have follow-up conversations to clarify the feedback was frustrating," he says, adding that it also left him feeling awkward around his colleagues.

Now Roberto taps two or three people each quarter to ask for one thing he might work on. "They don't offer the same things, but over time I hear themes, and that gives me a good sense of where my growth edge lies," he says. "And I have really good conversations—with my boss, with my team, even with peers where there's some friction in the relationship. They're happy to tell me one thing to change, and often they're right. It does help us work more smoothly together."

Research has shown that those who explicitly seek critical feedback (that is, who are not just fishing for praise) tend to get higher performance ratings. Why? Mainly, we think, because someone who's asking for coaching is more likely to take what is said to heart and genuinely improve. But also because when you ask for feedback, you not only find out how others see you, you also *influence* how they see you. Soliciting constructive criticism communicates humility, respect, passion for excellence, and confidence, all in one go.

6. Engage in small experiments

After you've worked to solicit and understand feedback, it may still be hard to discern which bits of advice will help you and which ones won't. We suggest designing small experiments to find out. Even though you may doubt that a suggestion will be useful, if the downside risk is small and the upside potential is large, it's worth a try. James, the CFO we discussed earlier, decided to take the board member's advice for the next presentation and see what happened. Some directors were pleased with the change, but the shift in format prompted others to offer suggestions of their own. Today James reverse-engineers his presentations to meet board members' current top-of-mind concerns. He sends out an e-mail a week beforehand asking for any burning questions, and either front-loads his talk with answers to them or signals at the start that he will get to them later on. "It's a little more challenging to prepare for but actually much easier to give," he says. "I spend less time fielding unexpected questions, which was the hardest part of the job."

That's an example worth following. When someone gives you advice, test it out. If it works, great. If it doesn't, you can try again, tweak your approach, or decide to end the experiment.

Criticism is never easy to take. Even when you know that it's essential to your development and you trust that the person delivering it wants you to succeed, it can activate psychological triggers. You might feel misjudged, ill-used, and sometimes threatened to your very core.

Your growth depends on your ability to pull value from criticism in spite of your natural responses and on your willingness to seek out even more advice and coaching from bosses, peers, and subordinates. They may be good or bad at providing it, or they may have little time for it—but you are the most important factor in your own development. If you're determined to learn from whatever feedback you get, no one can stop you.

Sheila Heen and **Douglas Stone** are cofounders of Triad Consulting Group and teach negotiation at Harvard Law School. They are the coauthors of the forthcoming book *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well* (Viking/Penguin, 2014), from which this article is adapted.

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Lois Hall • 12 days ago

A stumbling block to feedback is often the mindset of the giver and the receiver of the word 'feedback.' An experiment I recommend to managers is to ask an employee to meet with them because they want to provide them with some 'feedback.' Watch the expression of the receiver when they hear the word feedback. Then, once seated, provide them with some positive feedback about something you observed them doing, and watch their reaction. Very interesting observations. The reason? Usually feedback is most often provided only when something is wrong, not for positive or developmental purposes. A point to remember: Constructive and/or positive feedback should be given on an ongoing basis, not simply for the purposes of a performance review, usually a once a year "event." It should be an ongoing process. And remember, the root word in constructive is construct: to build. The mindset should be to provide feedback with the intention to build the person up to their next level of success. This brings you to the level of coaching as opposed to discipline. Now the mindset about feedback can begin to change for the "positive."

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Craig Martin, Master Coach • 14 days ago

David Pottruck, former CEO of Charles Schwab, used to say "Feedback is the Breakfast of Champions.", borrowing from the Wheaties cereal advertising tag line. High performers have a consistent pattern of seeking out and receiving feedback; it's a "healthy habit", much like regular exercise or managing one's finances. And, it's a powerful leadership move that your stakeholders respect and copy themselves, reinforcing the positive habit in the culture.

^ | ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Ebrahim Rezaee • 15 days ago

Thanks. Very useful

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Jilly Banter • 15 days ago

Really great and balanced article. So very refreshing to read something aimed so much at the receiver and giving so many constructive and rational suggestions, yet being so understanding of the very real triggers in all this. Really thought provoking as both a giver and receiver of feedback. Excellent. Thank you.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Foundation123 • 18 days ago

Leader Quote – 10

Feed Back Should Never Be a Draw
Back In Coaching Executive Leaders

Feed Back Should Always Be a Kick
Back In Coaching a Losing Staff Team

In our Corporate
World of today's Market of Aggressive Strategies to Win Win Win and
Win some more at all Cost. Will Eventually Cost your Executive
Winning Warrior to walk away from the Team.

If you the Coach
are Given a Mission to Divide and Conquer the Market and Gain Access
to everyone's Profit Share: You will be the Most Sought After
Coaching Executive in the World.

Criticism: is a Negative Stone

see more

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Iriser → **Foundation123** • 18 days ago

Wow! This is IMPOSSIBLE to read or understand! Too many capital letters; to few signs of punctuation!

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Bordeaux11 • 21 days ago

I am always wondering - if people know there is technology that enables this? We use SuccessFactors - makes it as easy as rating a restaurant in Yelp for the manager and the words are all pre-populated and editable based on their star choice and competency. Managers and employees don't need to suffer~ but they do and it's rather sad.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Bill Fitzgerald → **Bordeaux11** • 16 days ago

We found a great tool for requesting and receiving helpful feedback. Check out Two Minute Feedback. We have hiring managers using this tool and they are getting great feedback and making immediate improvements in their process! The best I've seen.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Sunny • 21 days ago

Great article! All the steps are really useful. But I have a question about the step 4 "unpack the feedback" Do we need to discuss it further with the

Step 1: Empower the recipient. Do we need to discuss it further with the feedback giver or just try to dig the feedback ourselves? If by ourselves, how can we do it?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Vipin Nair • 25 days ago

Brilliant!. A good perspective on the feedback, especially the last line - "you are the most important factor in your own development. If you're determined to learn from whatever feedback you get, no one can stop you"

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Hybrid • a month ago

Excellent! I have done a few experiments my self on a few of the GEN Y MT's for the past two years and have had quite a bit of success with those who came directly from College and after completing a degree ++

What I learned from this was that todays employees are slightly narcissist and dealing with this additional element was really time consuming as the mentor, sponsor, coach and Boss.

They always like only the good feedback and whenever i did give negative feedback, the mentoring session did not last long as other times and there was a coldness in the end.

I adapted to the situation by first reassuring that the MT has a great future, a good career plan is in place and only through coaching via the fast-track that one can succeed. Now this usually works. But the question is how can i stifle those narcissist tendencies that consumes my time?

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Tom O'Neil → Hybrid • 24 days ago

Hybrid, I suggest that you read Personal Power by H.B. Karp, published by the American Management Association (AMACOM). Although it dates back to 1985, one of the topics addressed is employee resistance. The discussion of the various types of resistance and the approaches to handling them appears to match the approach you are already taking. His advice may help you further your plan for stifling the narcissist tendencies that are consuming your time. Good luck.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Hungtx Tran • a month ago

Thank you, it is really great and worth reading. Hope that I can find more useful feedback for 2014 year ahead, we all want to improve and growth but often it is not easy for us to point out our weaknesses, the others' views are crucial as well as our actions (you are the most important factor). Bring the action!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Nicole Rawski • a month ago

This is a great article! I think it's important to always be improving as a person and the best way to do this is through feedback from others. Another method for giving feedback so that the recipient will allow it to register is to ask them for permission. Simply asking someone if you can offer feedback will usually bring their guard down to listen. Thank you for a great read.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Caroline Flanagan • a month ago

"You are the most important factor in your own development". This is the

best article on Feedback I've come across to date. We can all feel victimised and powerless when faced with feedback or criticism. As you so rightly point out, emotions interfere and make it too difficult to turn appropriate feedback into something positive and constructive we can use to help us improve. By showing us how to sidestep our emotions, evaluate the feedback we do receive and actively solicit feedback on our own terms this article puts us back in control of our own development.

1 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Jason Lankow • a month ago

Great article! This is a really refreshing set of reminders heading into a new year. I really like the suggestion to "sort towards coaching" as a method for being more receptive rather than getting defensive.

^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›



Morag Barrett • a month ago

I loved this article. We regularly teach a program on giving AND receiving feedback - this will be one of the recommended resources for participants. I particularly liked the simplicity of "ask for one thing you can do"

6 ^ ▾ • Reply • Share ›

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