

Getting the most from feedback

- a novice's guide to learning from others' perspectives on your work Version 1, June 2020

Taking feedback on your current performance is extremely helpful. It can help you with the whole not-making-the-same-mistakes-over-and-over-again. But it's a can of worms and doing it well is harder than it looks. Not being able to take feedback means that insights into how things could be better, how an individual or group could be achieving its potential, will stop being offered, demoralising people who can see things need to change, and creating a false sense of adequacy.

[This novice's guide tackles both feedback to individuals and to groups. It jumps around a bit within that...]

Initial considerations

What is the feedback **about**? Is it something that is central to your identity? Is it about something you absolutely slogged your guts out to get "just so", on which you (and allies) have pinned your hopes of a Brighter Future? If so, then it's likely that your defensiveness and unwillingness to actually listen to (beyond merely 'hearing') critiques will be quite high, in comparison to something that you dashed off quickly that you don't care so much about.

Who is giving the feedback, why and how? If the feedback is coming from a trusted friend, behind closed doors, and couched in a 'praise sandwich', with enough ego stroking and carefully chosen words, it is - hopefully - not so hard to take. If on the other hand it is coming from someone you don't know or do know who you suspect is trying to tear you down/undermine you, and they are doing it in a public and deliberately inflammatory and provocative way (with literal or metaphorical sneers/snark and finger-jabbing-in-the-chest) then you are going to have to work very hard to keep your cool and not to dismiss what is being said because of how it is being said, and why. (Sometimes, sadly, our enemies will tell us things that our friends will not. That's life).

Barriers to taking feedback

First and foremost it's going to be your ego, and your need to at all times think of yourself as either a competent person, a smart person or a good person (or all three). And if information comes at you that suggests that on one occasion recently you were not all three of those, then your brain is going to deploy some ninja level defence mechanisms if you let it. And if you let it often enough, you will develop a reputation as someone it is too hard or not-worth-the-effort to give feedback to. Which will lead to your **second barrier**.

Not even friends and allies will want to give you feedback. Which means you will be stuck with learning from yourself. Which, given our natural barriers, is tricky AF.

Also, let's be real. Sometimes feedback is being weaponised. Frenemies who want to humiliate/attack you will give you feedback in ways calculated to outrage (publicly, with loaded words and questions - when did you stop beating your wife). Then there are people who mean well but have no clue how to actually deliver feedback with skill or compassion. Well, suck it up, if you want to be good at taking feedback, you're going to have to learn how to cope with all of these (though of course, you're allowed to gently suggest to them that they move up from novice to expert at giving feedback).

Getting feedback

Try to make the giving of feedback something that people can and DO normally offer you (most cultures are designed not to give feedback - "anything for the quiet life".)

So probably the number one thing is to find ways that people can **give feedback anonymously**. Whether that is on a paper into a box, or via an online survey where they do not have to leave their email address. If you see an organisation that is not making it easy for people to give genuinely anonymous feedback, you are looking at an organisation that just does not care, that is probably complacent, rigid or moribund. Or all three. The feedback opportunity also has to be at-the-moment. There is no point saying, as so many have "we will circulate an email in a few days with a link to a survey." People will have forgotten the granular stuff, will just give you generalities.

If anonymous feedback is not possible, you need to create the conditions for people to give personal feedback.

The absolute **number one way of stopping people from giving feedback** is being defensive and/or aggressive towards them if they do give it. You only have to do that once, to one person, and word will get around...After that, the feedback will dry up. That doesn't mean that you have to pretend to agree or say that you will do what they suggest when you clearly have no intention of doing so. Why add being patronising/condescending/dishonest to the charge sheet. But it does mean that you respond to their feedback without rancour or anger. Again, tricky.

The **close-second way to stop getting good feedback** is to get it, process it, agree with it and then

not ACT on it. Why would people continue to make the effort to give you detailed, specific, constructive feedback if you are never seen to act on it? So, that means you have to have an organisation that is capable not just of taking feedback/doing post-mortems but doing them for REAL rather than for show. That is an organisation which can change its routines and assumptions, take on new skills and behaviours in response to feedback.

Top tips for taking personal feedback in helpful ways

Figure out what your particular current emotional triggers are (this will involve some reflection on previous occasions on which you handled feedback well or badly. You might need to ask folks who know you well who have given you feedback/watched you take/not take feedback).

Figure out what your go-to ego defence mechanisms are (projection, displacement, whatever) and get better at spotting them and compassionately putting them in a box.

Take all the steps you can to get the feedback delivered in formats which work both for you and the feedback giver (but they may not be interested in all of these).

Ideally - and especially if it is something you are likely to be sensitive about - have a time gap between the initial giving (in writing/over a phone call) and a face-to-face. This time can be spent processing emotionally and coming up with specific questions, thinking about examples and perspectives and suppressing your need to explain away each example that has been given.

Make sure that when you are getting the feedback you are watered, fed, not going to be interrupted/having to take any phone calls, so you give the feedback-giver your undivided attention.

If it is getting a bit overwhelming, take a break.

Try to monitor your body language: crossed arms, raised voice, eye rolling are not going to help anyone...

Remember, you don't have to agree instantly (or ever) with the feedback, but you do need to show that you haven't just heard it but that you have listened to it.

At the end of the session, recap the points that have been raised in your own words. Take notes.

THANK (where appropriate) the person who gave you the feedback. They have helped you.

But, as with an apology, for a thank you to be sincere it means that you have to take serious steps to prevent

the same thing happening again. Think - what procedures and processes need to be in place to make it less likely that the same feedback would be given next time round? It's not enough to say "will try harder" - there will need to be serious efforts at acquiring new levels of skill, of creating ways of cross-checking/mutual support.

Two final points

One: There is the question of the attitude and behaviour/motivation of the feedback giver.

Are they REALLY trying to help, or are they using this as a power play, to assert dominance, to demand obedience, etc. Are they looking to humiliate, control? Are they not willing (or even able) to respect your autonomy, be at all careful about your emotions? Are they just getting off on having someone to torture, while pretending that *'it's for your own good/I'm only trying to help you'*?

Fuck those people. Seriously. Yes, you can take the criticism that has come from them in writing, but you are under ZERO obligation to be bullied and belittled by fragile little man-babies in person.

[the author of this paragraph is in no way reliving something that happened half a decade ago, nope, not at all]

Two: at no point above have we referred to "positive" or "negative" feedback. Feedback is feedback. You start putting labels on it, you'll inevitably make it harder to listen to the more challenging bits.

Songs to think about -

How to save a life by The Fray. No, really

How can I move from novice level to practitioner level at this?

Practice!

Stay tuned for the next (longer) guide, which will come at you soon. Ask us questions (we may not know the answer). Check out our [website](#)

Also watch out for a 2 pager guide on GIVING feedback - the other side of this coin.

*Novice and practitioner level is a reference to the Active Citizenship Toolkit, which CEM and allies are developing. See [here](#)

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