

Making Feedback Work for You

Receiving feedback can be challenging. Even if the feedback is praise, some people have difficulty in knowing how to respond to it or feel embarrassed by it. When the feedback is constructive, emotional and psychological reactions can be complicated and get in the way of seeing where there is true value in the information. This article looks at ways to help with understanding our reactions to feedback and how to use feedback to set goals for learning and development.

Receiving praise

For many people, receiving praise is not as easy as it may seem.

When paid a compliment, whether professionally or personally, there are a number of ways in which people reduce the impact of the praise.

- **Devaluation:** "It was nothing, really."
- **Distrust:** "You're just saying that."
- **Deflection:** "David did all the hard work."
- **Reflection:** "Well, you did an excellent job on yesterday's report."

All of these are common responses, but it is important to understand why people use them. If these are normal reactions for you, consider why you feel the need to resort to them.



Sometimes, self-critical people can find it awkward to accept praise when they receive it, as it does not fit with their own view of themselves. In some cases, they set their own personal bar too high for them, or anyone else, to realistically reach. If this sounds like you, as a development target, try to persuade yourself that perfection is not necessary to perform well in your job and your life.

Other people are simply more concerned with internal validation than external, i.e. they care about their own assessment of success or failure more than anyone else's. While this type of person can benefit from not feeling a need for praise, they also lose the benefit of an external perspective.

Accepting praise unqualified can be difficult for some, but accepting a genuine compliment gracefully can be both modest and assertive. The best way to accept praise is to **thank the provider, genuinely and happily**. They gave you the praise for a reason and they will most likely be happy to see it have the desired effect. Equally, especially when it comes from a manager, the purpose of the praise is probably to point out a good or desirable behaviour with the aim of making clear that this is what they want or expect from you. Take this into account and think about how you can continue to do the kinds of things you have been praised for recently or in the past.

Receiving constructive feedback

For many people, constructive feedback is hard to hear. Nobody likes to be told that they have done something badly or failed to live up to expectations. There is a relatively standard progression of responses that people have to critical comments, which can be summarised by the SARAH model:

- **Shock**: an initial reaction to any kind of negative comment can be shock and disbelief, especially if it comes as a surprise or from an unexpected source.
- **Anger**: this is often followed by anger or resentment, at the feedback or the person giving it.
- **Rationalisation/Rejection**: in this stage, we attempt to find a reason to reject the feedback as inaccurate, either by disproving the comments or by discrediting the source. It is important not to get stuck in this phase, as the value of the feedback will be lost.
- **Acceptance**: this is the crucial stage where we accept the feedback, take it in and look for what we can learn from it.
- **Help**: finally, we seek help in learning from the experience, often from the person who provided the feedback.

Intentions versus consequences

A common problem which prevents people from accepting constructive feedback is that they have a self-image based on their own intentions and can't easily see the difference between those intentions and the impact of their actions on other people. If external feedback conflicts with their self-image ("But I was trying to help, why is she saying I was taking over?"), rather than see it as an opportunity to understand this difference, they may react only with the first three steps of SARAH: shock, anger and rejection. When this happens, the feedback is wasted and the relationship with the feedback giver may also be damaged. It is important to understand that others only experience your actions and their consequences, without necessarily having an insight into your intentions.



To make effective use of constructive feedback, there are a number of practical things to think about, both before and during a feedback session.

Be open-minded

Open your mind up to the potential for change. Remember that constructive feedback is not about you as a person, but about job behaviours. If you have not come up to a necessary standard in some way, it does not make you a bad person or a failure, and certainly does not mean the person offering feedback is suggesting you are, it simply means you have scope to learn and improve. The person providing feedback should be focused on helping you to do this, so try to see the input from that perspective. If you can skip over or move quickly through the SAR steps to the AH steps, you'll make the best use of the suggestions you receive. Try to actively put down your instinctive defences and be receptive.

Analyse and confirm

The above notwithstanding, do remember that you have the right to analyse and confirm the feedback you receive for accuracy. Confirm it with other sources if appropriate or simply think it through yourself. If you feel there is salient information, of which the person giving feedback is unaware, think carefully about how you could present this, without being defensive or simply trying to disprove their opinion. For example, you could say: "I appreciate your input on the video. I just wondered if you were aware that the original specs were changed at the last minute, which meant we only had a day to make substantial changes before the presentation?" This kind of information is relevant and, if the other person is not aware of it, may affect their assessment of the situation.

Move forward

Once you have established an accurate understanding of any issues that have been raised, the important thing for you is to consider what you can do to improve in future. Can the person giving you feedback help? Don't be afraid to ask them for suggestions

and assistance in making necessary changes. Hopefully, they will be happy to do this. Work with them to develop a plan of action.

Set goals

“Goals are one of the key ways that feedback gets translated into action.” [1]

To give yourself a clear path and target, set yourself mini goals to achieve on the way to your ultimate aim. Good goals should be challenging, but achievable, and you should be comfortable that they fulfil both of these criteria in order to keep you focused and motivated. Again, work with the feedback provider to agree what these should be and a timeframe to work towards. The attached *Good Goal Setting Worksheet* will help guide you through this process.

Follow up

If you feel the need for further input or want to discuss anything which comes up as part of your feedback process, don't be afraid to go back to the person and raise these things. Hopefully, they will be happy to discuss it further and offer their experience and insights.

Summary

Feedback is an essential part of personal development. It is important to learn how to accept it and then utilise it to your own benefit. Recognise praise as the affirmation of what you do well and constructive criticism as an indicator of ways you can learn and become better in future. Whichever feedback you receive, always remember it is not about who you are as person or your intentions; it is about job performance, now and in the future.

[1] Manuel London, *Job Feedback* (Psychology Press, 2010) p142.

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