Enhancing Leadership through the Art of Receiving — and Delivering — Feedback

Law Department Management

Skills and Professional Development

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I vividly recall my first critical lesson about feedback. As a summer associate, I poured my energy into crafting a legal memo, only to have it returned by a senior attorney covered in red ink. My less-than-enthusiastic reaction prompted him to remark, "You know, most people won't take the time to tell you how to do this better."

Why do we become defensive when offered information that could improve our performance? For intelligent, ambitious professionals, wouldn't regular feedback be the quickest path to excellence?

If humans were purely logical, receiving feedback wouldn't be an issue. However, we often engage in self-protective behaviors and resist change. And trust also plays a significant role — when we don't fully trust the person providing feedback, our defenses go up.

Yet, receiving feedback is crucial — it's one of the quickest ways to improve performance, build relationships, and enhance personal effectiveness. The reality is, not responding effectively and graciously to feedback can stall or derail your career. Learning to receive feedback well not only supports your growth but also fosters a learning culture within your organization.

How to receive feedback gracefully

In my coaching and leadership practice, we use 10 strategies for receiving feedback effectively and gracefully developed by my mentor [Marshall Goldsmith](#):

1. **Listen actively:** Fully engage with the person providing feedback. Put aside distractions and focus on understanding their perspective.

2. **Maintain a positive attitude:** Approach feedback with an open mind, seeing it as an opportunity for growth rather than criticism.

3. **Ask clarifying questions:** Ensure you understand the feedback by asking questions that clarify the points being made.

4. **Thank the person providing feedback:** Show appreciation for their time and effort in helping you improve.

5. **Reflect on the feedback:** Take time to process the feedback, considering how it aligns with your personal and professional goals.

6. **Respond, don't react:** Manage your initial emotional response and respond thoughtfully after you've had time to reflect.

7. **Seek understanding, not justification:** Focus on understanding the feedback rather than justifying your actions.

8. **Commit to curiosity:** Stay curious about the feedback and how it can contribute to your development.

9. **Give yourself space and grace:** Allow yourself time to digest the feedback and approach it with self-compassion.

10. **Follow up:** After implementing changes based on the feedback, check in with the person who provided it to discuss your progress.

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Mastering the art of providing effective feedback

Building the skill of *giving* useful feedback is just as important as learning how to receive it. Effective feedback can promote positive change, build trust, enhance learning, improve relationships, boost morale, facilitate teamwork, support personal growth, and drive performance. However, poorly delivered feedback can damage relationships, reduce morale, create defensiveness, and lead to a toxic work environment or turnover.

One of the most effective feedback systems I've encountered was also developed by Goldsmith. After years of coaching thousands of leaders, he coined the term "Feedforward," which emphasizes future-oriented, constructive feedback.

10 Principles of Feedforward

1. **Ask permission:** This shows respect and allows the person to prepare mentally for receiving feedback, increasing their openness to it.

2. **Be timely:** Provide feedback while the behavior is still fresh in everyone's mind, ensuring relevance and impact.

3. **Focus on the future:** Since the past cannot be changed, concentrate on what can be improved moving forward.

4. **Be specific:** Clearly articulate the behavior that needs to change and its impact, avoiding vague or general statements.

5. **Address behaviors, not the person:** Separate the individual from their actions to avoid personal attacks and keep the conversation constructive.

6. **Check for understanding:** After providing feedback, ensure that the recipient has accurately understood your message.

7. **Offer support:** Let the person know you are there to help them make the necessary changes, reinforcing your commitment to their growth.

8. **Invite dialogue:** Encourage a two-way conversation, where the recipient can share their thoughts, ideas, and past experiences related to the feedback.

9. **Express appreciation:** Acknowledge the difficulty of change, and express gratitude for the effort they will make.

10. **Maintain a growth mindset:** Recognize that change takes time, and be patient and supportive throughout the process.

How to build a feedback-friendly culture

Consistently applying these practices in giving and receiving feedback creates a cultural norm that makes feedback a natural, integral part of your team's dynamics. Trust and openness are crucial to this process. Encourage feedback at all levels — no one ever becomes so senior that they don't need it. In fact, senior leaders have a significant impact on others and must be fully engaged in setting the example and being the best leaders they can be.

If adopting a feedback culture represents a significant shift for your organization, consider launching a C-suite-sponsored corporate initiative to promote and model the desired behaviors. Everyone is striving to improve, and such an initiative can provide the necessary support and attention to make this change successful.

Teambuilding Exercise 1: Unlock Potential

Setup:

Divide participants into pairs or small groups. Each pair shares three strengths they appreciate about each other, followed by one constructive area for growth. After individual discussions, groups share learnings with the larger team.

Benefits:

- Promotes positive and specific feedback in a safe environment.

- Builds trust and appreciation among colleagues.

- Encourages openness to receiving and giving feedback.

- Shifts focus from criticism to development.

Teambuilding Exercise 2: The Feedback Game

Setup:
Create a common workplace scenario (such as a team member consistently missing deadlines, or showing up late to meetings). Assign roles and have participants practice giving and receiving feedback based on the scenario. Debrief afterward to discuss best practices and learnings.

Benefits:

- Provides a safe space to experiment with different feedback styles.

- Develops effective communication and conflict resolution skills.

- Increases comfort with providing and receiving feedback in real-world situations.

- Allows for practice in active listening and empathy.

Bonus tip: Encourage follow-up after these exercises. Discuss how learnings can be applied in daily work and implement action plans to address common feedback themes. Remember, building a feedback culture is an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

Practice makes progress

As you navigate your leadership journey, keep the 10 principles of giving and receiving feedback in mind. These are life skills, and like any muscle, it takes practice to strengthen them. Don't be afraid to ask for feedback on your feedback. With effort and self-awareness, mastering this ability will

become a leadership strength that supports your success and the growth of your team throughout your career.

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An attorney and former Fortune 5 executive, Amii Barnard-Bahn is an executive coach and consultant who specializes in accelerating the success of Fortune 500 corporate legal executives and their teams at companies such as Adobe, FedEx, AbbVie, and The Gap. Ranked the #1 Global Thought Leader for Careers and in Law by Thinkers360 and a LinkedIn Top Executive Coaching Voice, *Forbes* calls her "one of the top coaches for legal and compliance executives."

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