

CC:YOU

## Truth in Feedback

Positive or negative, given or received, feedback can be tricky. We shatter some popular misconceptions to guide you.

By Chris Clarke-Epstein

Feedback isn't always easy to give or receive. But it's vital, and timing is crucial. Here are 12 popular feedback misconceptions corrected.

**Misconception 1:** We don't need to worry about feedback, we conduct performance appraisals.

**Truth:** Annual performance appraisals aren't enough.

If you've been working unsatisfactorily for 12 months, you're awfully good at doing something incorrectly.

And if you've been doing something well for 12 months and no one has mentioned it, your performance appraisal might feel like too little, too late.

Performance appraisals should be summaries of everything employees and supervisors have been discussing all year. If you're a supervisor, find ways to provide feedback each week for each person who reports to you—52 mini performance reviews a year.

**Misconception 2:** It's not my job to give feedback.

**Truth:** At any company that values continuous improvement, feedback is everybody's job.

If your workplace isn't feedback friendly, start a trend. First, praise. Reinforce positive actions and behaviors. Don't forget your boss: Positive feedback passed up the organization can have amazing results. Participate in suggestion programs honestly and enthusiastically. And request feedback on your own performance.

**Misconception 3:** If you're not asked, keep your mouth shut.

**Truth:** When you don't deliver critical feedback, you declare your indifference.

Saying nothing means you don't care. But if your feedback concerns how your company works, how customers are treated, or what the company is doing right or wrong, you should speak up. Think through your message carefully, and make sure you deliver it with specific examples and suggestions.

When you observe someone who needs feedback and you're reluctant to give it, ask yourself these questions:

- If I were the person in this situation, would I want to be told?
- With feedback, can the person change what's happening?
- Would the feedback embarrass me to say it or embarrass the other person to hear it? If your feedback is embarrassing but necessary, spend time carefully crafting your message.

**Misconception 4:** No news is good news.

**Truth:** No news is no news.

Pretending that no news is good news prevents you from identifying and capitalizing on your strengths and improving your shortcomings. For the next week, ask each customer a simple question at the end of your conversation: "From your perspective, what's one thing we or I could do to improve our service, product, or process?" Take note of the answers.

**Misconception 5:** Too much praise spoils people.

**Truth:** Praise that's grounded in reality nurtures people.

Although we understand our own need for positive reinforcement, most of us don't go out of our way to provide it to others. Why? Because no one's ever taught us how to give positive feedback that rings true. There's a simple formula for effective positive feedback: Make it specific. "I'm glad to have you on my team" becomes "Your fresh approach to the shipping problem really helped us meet the deadline." Hear the difference?

**Misconception 6:** Successful people don't need feedback.

**Truth:** Successful people and organizations know that feedback can turn failures into successes.

What if your employer never told you what's expected of you? What if you went through school never getting a report card or taking an exam? How would you learn to function at your best? Ignorance isn't bliss. It hurts less to hear an unpleasant truth than to discover later you could've corrected the situation.

**Misconception 7:** Receiving or giving negative feedback won't bother me.

**Truth:** Receiving or giving negative feedback is uncomfortable for everyone.

Hearing critical feedback is difficult emotionally. So is dishing it out. There's a predictable pattern to our reactions, however, and knowing the stages people go through when they receive negative feedback may better prepare you to deal with such reactions whether they're yours or your staff members'. Keep in mind the following acronym, SARA:

- **Surprise or shock.** You may have no idea how to respond at first. At this time, do nothing.
- **Anger.** This stage also begs for inaction. Recognize your anger, do nothing, and know you'll move past it.
- **Rationalization.** Here come all of your excuses and defenses. Before you share

them with anyone else, listen to yourself and work to separate the purely defensive from the legitimate.

● **Acceptance.** In this final stage, ask questions about anything that's unclear. Receiving negative feedback doesn't mean you have to accept all of it, but you do need to think it through. Then take what's helpful and put it to use.

There's no predictable timetable for moving through those stages. Different types of feedback will cause you to move through them at different speeds. Be concerned only if you seem stuck in one stage and unable to move on.

**Misconception 8:** I give feedback. I told Susan about my problem with Bill.

**Truth:** It's only feedback if you're giving it to the person involved.

John has a problem with Bill. John tells Susan about it. That's not feedback; that's a triangulated conversation. Unless Susan tells Bill a second-hand version of the complaint, Bill will still be in the dark about John's problem.

The same thing happens with praise. A supervisor often tells everyone else how great his or her team is: "My people know I'm proud of them." Do they? Have they ever heard it firsthand? Praise, like constructive criticism, needs to be delivered to the person who deserves it.

**Misconception 9:** Leaders receive quality feedback.

**Truth:** The higher up people are in an organization, the less likely they are to receive quality feedback. Many people fear reprisals for telling their leaders the truth. In some companies, such fears are justified. If you're a leader, improve the quality of the feedback you receive by spending more time in the places you're likely to get it, with the people who have the information you need. It'll take time to build the trust necessary for people to open up. Don't give up. Your time investment will pay off.

**Misconception 10:** Leaders actively seek feedback.

**Truth:** Leaders—like the rest of us—rarely seek feedback.

Leaders often ask verbally for candid feedback while their body language or other nonverbal cues shout, “Don’t tell me anything negative!” If you really want

honest feedback, make sure that your nonverbal messages match your words. The quality and quantity of your feedback will improve.

**Misconception 11:** I’ll wait until later to deliver the feedback.

**Truth:** Except in highly emotional situations, feedback is better delivered sooner rather than later.

There’s always an emotional reaction to negative or positive feedback. No magic words make negative feedback painless. The longer you wait to deliver the feedback, the less likely you’ll give it, and the less effective it will be. If you have something to say, say it now.

The one exception is if you, the deliverer of the feedback, have an emotional stake in it. If so, make sure you’re in control of your emotions before you speak. Count to 10, sleep on it, but don’t let yourself off the hook.

**Misconception 12:** My boss won’t give me any feedback.

**Truth:** If you need feedback, seek it.

If your boss isn’t a feedback pro, regularly ask for it and be patient as he or she learns how to make it specific and timely. Stop in your closemouthed supervisor’s office once a week and make one of the following requests: “Give me one thing that I need to work on” or “What’s one thing I do that you’d like me to do more of?” Listen carefully, and let your boss know how you acted on his or her suggestions.

You’ve learned the value of feedback and some good ways to give and receive it. But you’ve had many years to practice ducking the process. You’re going to need some time to change your behavior. Practice the pointers I’ve given you, and measure your progress. The rewards will amaze you.

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