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**IN THIS ARTICLE**

*Upward Appraisal, Interpersonal Skills,  
Performance Management*

# Give It To Me Straight

BY JERRY BAUMGARTNER

**D**id you ever ask anyone, "Hey, exactly what is it about me that bothers you?" If so, it's likely that the response involved a lot of hemming and hawing. But when you supervise or manage people, it's important to seek negative feedback.

How do you get the people you lead to tell you what bothers them about your behavior? How do you get them to tell you what you need to know so you can change?

It's difficult enough to get negative feedback from people with whom you have satisfactory relationships. It's even worse with people you don't get along with. And it's almost impossible with people who are hostile toward you. Complicating the problem, subordinates may not be candid in their negative feedback because of your position. Or they may hold back because they think you really don't want to hear criticism.

*Few of us like to be criticized. But supervisors and managers need to ask for negative feedback from subordinates in order to become better leaders. Here are some tips for getting people to tell you what you need to know.*

How do people get the idea that others don't want negative feedback? Typically, from past reactions. Frequently, people respond to negative comments by arguing with the person giving the feedback. Or they try to negate the criticism by explaining why they behaved as they did. Both of those reactions imply that the feedback giver is wrong. And they indicate a disinterest in hearing negative feedback.

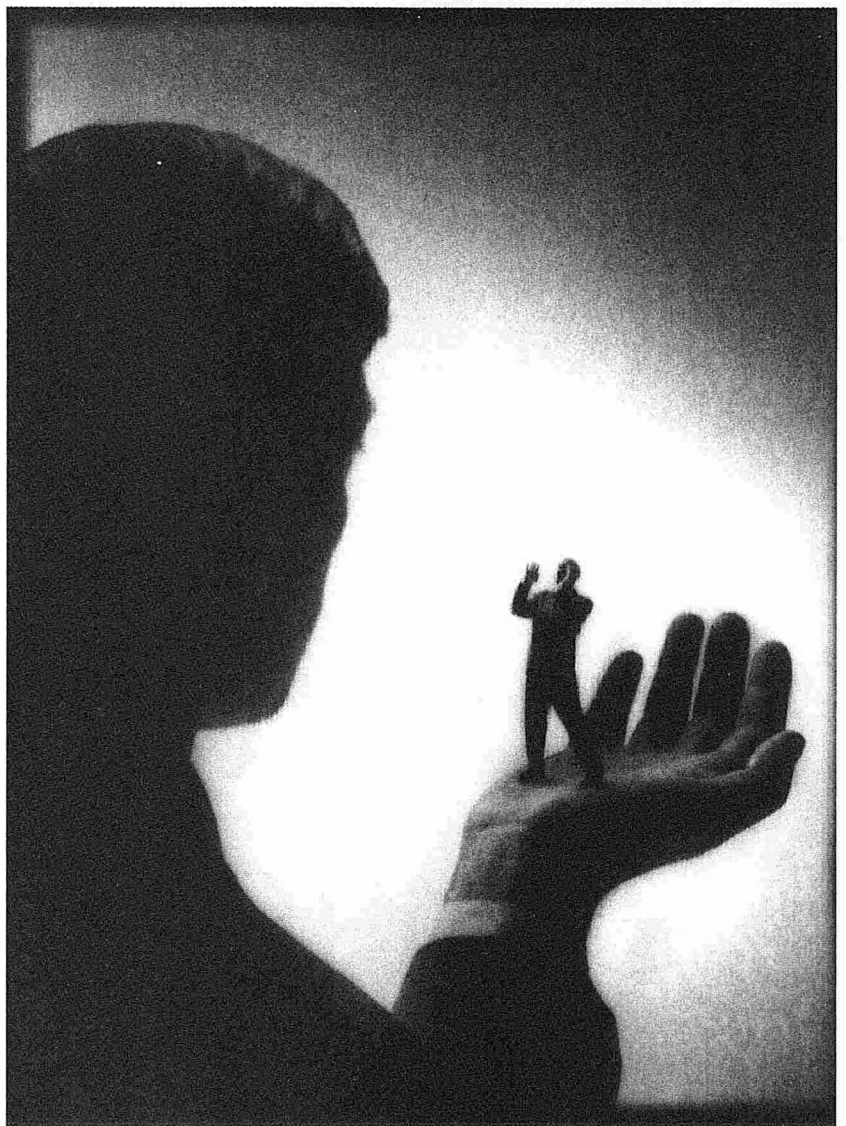
### **Straight talk**

If you want to become a more effective leader, you need to communicate to people that you're open to their comments and that you're willing to listen at any time.

First, get people to open up to you and tell you how they view you as a leader, supervisor, or manager. Don't argue with them or try to correct their impressions. Just thank them and accept what they say as true, from their point of view. Your commitment is to listen and consider their comments. You can't make informed decisions about your own behavior unless you create a conducive atmosphere for hearing about it. By seeking and accepting negative feedback, you can learn what subordinates expect of you, instead of trying to guess.

What stops many people from seeking negative feedback is a twinge in the gut that signals, "Uh-oh, I'm going to be criticized." So they back away. In doing that, they lose the opportunity to hear information they need to solve problems and become more effective. They also fear that if they ask for negative feedback, they'll be obligated to follow through and change the criticized behavior. They're afraid of losing personal power. They worry about being asked to do something they can't or won't do.

One solution is to ask for alternatives. Just say, "You know, that's not something I can do. What can I do instead?" Continue to negotiate with feedback givers until they suggest something you're willing and able to do. That way, you get the necessary information to make a desired change, you satisfy people by changing your behavior as requested, and you retain your personal power.



The way you ask for feedback helps you take charge of it. You may find it useful to write a script on various ways to request negative feedback. The language is very important. Your goal should be to communicate your openness. Avoid language that alienates people or makes them think they're being accused. For example, say, "I've been thinking about my leadership style. I'm aware that people see me as..." Fill in the blank with something specific.

That statement communicates to the listener that you are aware you're doing something people don't like. It also signifies that you take ownership and responsibility for your behavior. In addition, the listener feels important because you're willing to share something personal about yourself. That can be a big

step in getting people on your side. They can help you make the change you desire.

Don't say, "One of the things I heard you say about me is...." That sounds accusatory. Leave the listener out of it. Talk only about yourself.

Next, get people to tell you what you do that causes others to view you in a certain way. Ask, "What are some behaviors you observe in me that would lead people to see me that way?"

The question acknowledges that

▶ There are things you're doing to contribute to people's perceptions.

▶ You don't know what those behaviors are.

▶ The people you're asking do know what the behaviors are.

▶ They have permission to tell you.

Now is the time to say clearly that things aren't the way you want them



to be—and to make it clear that you want to change the situation. You can say, "You know, that's not the way I want to be seen; I want to change your view." You haven't acknowledged or denied the perception; you haven't accused anyone of being wrong. You've simply said that you don't want to be perceived as you're being perceived and that you want to make a change. That approach alone casts you in a different light.

Last, ask subordinates for advice. Ask them how they want you to do things differently. Don't ask questions that can be answered only by a "yes" or "no." That's a surefire way to shut down communications. Remember, people tend to believe others don't want real information. If you ask yes-or-no questions, people are likely to agree with you just to escape an uncomfortable situation. The trouble is that they'll continue to have the same view of you.

Your task is to ask for advice in nonthreatening ways that maximize your chances of getting good information. For example, ask, "How would you like to see me do things differently?" The word "how" indicates that you acknowledge there is a way to behave differently. It also implies that the listener knows what that way is. "How" permits and even compels the listener to tell you.

Compare these two questions: "How would you like to see me do things differently?" and "Is there anything I can do differently?" The second question almost begs people to answer, "no." You may feel better, but you won't learn anything.

The final consideration: Will getting negative feedback produce results? Almost always, yes.

When you give people the opportunity to tell you how they view you and your behavior, they're likely to reciprocate by giving you information that will help you lead and work with them more effectively. And eventually, their perceptions of you will change. It can take time, especially if you've burned bridges in the past or if people are suspicious of your motives. Show your sincerity by continuing to ask for negative feedback in a nonthreatening manner, by not arguing with people when they are critical of you, and by not trying

to correct their perceptions. Above all, continue to listen and negotiate with them until you reach an agreement on what you'll do. Then do it.

It's always possible that people will refuse to respond with useful feedback and will hang on to their perceptions, no matter what you do. But you have nothing to lose and everything to gain by taking steps to show that you're receptive to negative feedback. You are bound to be viewed more favorably for just asking. ■

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