



GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK & THE SPECTRUM OF HAPPINESS

Alexander Barkin

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How many times have you been given feedback, was it always positive? Did it always help? If so, you're perfect and this article isn't for you. However, if at the end of a presentation, being on either the giving or the receiving side, you were less than happy, stick around, what you're about to read will be helpful!

Think of who's in charge. In any exchange of feedback between the giver and the receiver, perhaps counterintuitively, but nonetheless it's the receiver who is always in charge. As a receiver you have the opportunity to frame and drive the conversation to maximize the usefulness and meaningfulness of it. It's the receiver who decides what to let in, what sense to make of the feedback, which lessons to learn, and whether and how you are going to learn and improve.

There are myriads of seminars on how to give feedback, but they aren't as critical as the skill to learn how to absorb it. Think about any design critique and the blizzard of often unsolicited feedback you'll receive. "Somehow I have no emotional attachment to that button..." or "I'm just not feeling it..." or "Perhaps if you shift that pixel a little more to the left..."

During Design Critiques, how often do you hear a designer start their feedback with "This is knit-picking, but..." Well, if it's knit-picking - don't waste people's time. Don't provide your feedback unless you believe your idea will truly improve the design and be prepared to offer solid, and constructive solutions. Giving feedback is also a skill.

Feedback is the team's relationship with you and your relationship with the team. Again, think about giving and receiving feedback as a skill.

On the receiving end, we could get better at learning from feedback, taking charge and driving our own learning. We don't need to wait around for good givers to show up. Yes, some of us are lucky to have great mentors in our lives, people whom we trust and whose credibility and experience can actually be helpful to us, whose opinion we want. Instead, more frequently, we get feedback from everybody else. People who are horrible at giving feedback, who may do it unskillfully or for the wrong reasons, or worse, those who haven't really thought it through well at all...

It seems like most feedback coaching sessions focusing on teaching givers how to give are a push model of learning. I figure out what you need to learn and I push you to learn it. When actually it's the receiver who is in charge. Once you realize that, you gain understanding that you could draw learning even from off-base, unfair, poorly delivered feedback. What happens then? Well, you could become better, adaptable, and improved...it could make a huge difference!

Consider that people who are skilled at learning even from negative feedback - have learned how to improve, and generally have higher work satisfaction. They adapt quicker in new roles, and, by the way, get higher performance reviews, which suggests that if you get better at receiving feedback, it doesn't just change you, it changes how other people see you.

It doesn't matter how authoritative, powerful, or even skillful the giver is. The real leverage here is in teaching all of us that core human challenge - to see yourself and to take other people's input to see how you impact those around you learning from you.

Let's consider the psychology, at first glance working against us. It so happens that we are naturally wired against receiving feedback, because if we find anything wrong with it - we can simply dismiss it. On the contrary, the realization that if the feedback is spot on, we carry the burden of learning and improving. Chances are, without the skill, you are wired to find something wrong with the feedback you receive in order to dismiss it. However, even if as much as 90% of it may be completely irrelevant, the remaining 10% will ultimately help you grow!

Typically feedback triggers three main categories of reactions. The first is the "Truth Triggers." They are comprised of the following questions: Is it true? Is it correct? Is it accurate? Is it good advice?

The Truth Triggers are challenging to see because firstly, there is the challenge to process what the giver is trying to say, and secondly the challenge to see yourself accurately. We all have blind spots. I don't, but all of you do...see what I did there? ;)

The second category of reactions to feedback is the Relationship Triggers. The authority of the critics plays an important role. We immediately position critics on a hierarchy of validity based on relationship. We evaluate the relationship, and oftentimes put more value on the who is giving the feedback rather than what they are actually saying.

Overcoming this challenge is separating - the who from the what, and judging each on its own merits!

Finally, and possibly most importantly, there are Identity Triggers. This challenge has to do with your emotional reaction to feedback. Research suggests that the spectrum of individual emotional sensitivity and how long it takes to recover could vary by as much as 3,000%. According to a psychologist Dr. Martin Seligman, 50% of our reactions to events in our lives are based on genetic, inherited wiring factors. Whereas 10% are circumstance.

However, the remaining 40%, the biggest surprise, are things we have complete control over such as actions, thoughts, and behaviors.

In other words, there is a huge part of our life we have the power to change.

It comes down to how we choose to live our lives. The point is that regardless of the accuracy of these numbers, between 50 and 40% there is a lot of play to manage identity triggers more effectively.

Taking a deeper look into the neuroscience, we are all wired differently and there are multiple wiring factors. Think of these three points: The Baseline, the Swing, and the Recovery.

The Baseline is the idea that each one of us lives at some setpoint - a degree of happiness. Meaning individual events will knock you off, but you are going to gravitate back toward the baseline. That is your normal; your everyday state of mind. Now consider that some people live at 9, and some live at 3. This is relevant because if you live at 3, for example, the volume is down even when you receive positive feedback. Those whose baseline is naturally at 9 are happy about everything from a cup of coffee to a promotion.

There was research done on lottery winners, interestingly, within about a year of winning the lottery they are about as happy or unhappy as when before they won the lottery. Imagine that those who are jailed, within about a year, are too about as happy or unhappy as before they went to jail.

The Swing has to do with how far you may get knocked off of your baseline, and the Recovery has to do with how long it takes you to rebound. As I mentioned before, the these three factors can vary in us by as much as 3,000%.

Understanding your profile, can help you understand your reaction to feedback, as well as, when considering your colleague's reaction, estimating their baseline is also important in delivering considerate, thoughtful, and useful feedback.

There are challenges on either end of the spectrum. On one end, a piece of feedback can become overwhelmingly everything. The now can be perceived as forever. The feedback becomes supersized. You can fall into what is called the Google Bias. The Google Bias is if you're googling "things that are wrong with me" and get 1.2 million hits you identify with, such as: all your past mistakes, all of your failures, and the sponsored ads from your parents, teachers, and exes; as if nothing you've ever done was right.

Why is it Called Google Bias? It's called that because your search results are driven by your search keywords. You are not searching for "things you've done relatively well" to which you might get 10 million hits, and get a more balanced picture.

So if your original approach is from the depths of Google Bias - you cannot learn, you are too overwhelmed. The answer is not to hide in a corner, but to dismantle those distortions of self-image and perceive feedback at its actual size, and learn from it.

On the other end of the spectrum, being insensitive to feedback, or undersensitive, although if you're in that category you don't care what I call you, has its own challenges too. If you're a leader, or a spouse and wish not to become an ex-spouse, there are differences between how you see me and how I see myself. You might see me as aloof, but I may see myself as shy; You might see me as unfriendly, whereas I may see myself as efficient; overbearing versus outgoing; intimidating versus having high standards; elitist vs smart; impatient vs passionate...

When I think about feedback, I think about approaching life as a conversation.

A successful conversation is comprised of talking, but perhaps more importantly - listening. We make a decision to not just listen to words, but are we also open to hearing the reactions, and are we willing to adapt?

Possible reactions include: denial, deflection, self-righteousness, and irritation. Regardless of what was said - breathe; and simply say "Thank you."

Now think. Are you interested in improving?

Consider what was said and whether you can learn from it. The usefulness of feedback begins with being open to change. This is when engagement begins.

Another way to look at this is being adaptable. Adaptability leads to resilience. Life is full of lessons - it's up to us to choose to deflect, deny, get irritated, or to learn. If we meaningfully navigate through the lessons

learned we have an opportunity to become better, more productive, successful, and possibly creative people.

On the business end of it, I prefer to do work that others find value in and receive a paycheck for it. However, as opposed to working in silos, collaboratively we can be so much more successful. As Aristotle said, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” This is why the conversation is so important. Feedback requires trust, trust is built on relationships, and relationships begin with a conversation. The more meaningful and constructive the conversation - the more beneficial is the feedback to both the giver and receiver.

However, unless you're fishing for compliments, understand that sometimes there are difficult conversations. Most importantly, don't forget to participate in the conversation. By doing so you show to the person that your questions are important, your priorities are important, your feedback is important, and ultimately you are important! In other words, when I ask for feedback, I am not being rhetorical. The feedback matters even when it might be inconvenient, or you disagree, or even think it's irrelevant. Even if it leads you to realize that in order for you to stay relevant - you need to adapt. So, if you want to gauge whether what you're working on is working, whether it's your stakeholders or your 9-year old - just ask. Ask for feedback and be open to change.

There is a truth at the core of feedback that we struggle to get around. Feedback sits at the junction of two core human needs: one - we want and need to learn and grow. The simultaneous other is we need to feel accepted and respected the way we are now. Thus, the very fact of feedback suggests that how we are now isn't quite as we should be. This duality isn't going away. However, it helps us to understand our love and hate relationship with feedback is a part of the condition of being human.

Even if the conversation is framed well enough to be beneficial, the fact of the matter is that feedback, and especially constructive feedback can sometimes be unpleasant. Consider that some of our most important lessons in life came from, at times, painful experiences.

What's up with that? Why can't we have a pain free human learning system?

I wish I could offer you that, but in closing, I've shared with you what works for me, it's the skill to understand and manage the feedback in order to enrich our relationships and to get to the learning faster.

