

Is Feedback at Odds with Being a Team Player?

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If you've read much about self-improvement, you've undoubtedly heard that receiving feedback from others is valuable. Maybe you've heard that "feedback is a gift." Why is receiving feedback so good?

Whether participating in a structured 360-degree assessment, team discussion, or 1-on-1 performance review, feedback increases our self-awareness. Feedback provides valuable insight into how we are perceived by others. We gain awareness into our personality blind spots. We discover a deeper understanding of who we are, what we do well, and what we don't do so well. This understanding allows us to better leverage our talents, develop new skills, and improve our performance. We are able to grow to levels that are only possible with increased self-awareness.

Yet with all the benefits of feedback, many people are reluctant to receive it. They prefer the bliss of ignorance. They are not secure enough in themselves to handle critiques and evaluations, no matter how truthful and beneficial they may be. Like people who don't vote or volunteer, they prefer to just keep getting the results they've been getting than to face reality and do something about it. They prefer the comfort of complacency, even if it ultimately means losing a job or relationship. It should be no surprise then that the people who need feedback (and coaching or other professional help) the most are usually the ones who elude it.

On the other side of the feedback process, there are also people who don't want to give feedback. Some don't feel it is their place or responsibility. Some are concerned that their feedback will be used negatively for the person's performance evaluation. Some don't give feedback for fear they will upset others as if letting them continue to operate with the equivalent of food on their face is better than telling them that they have food on their face. Still others avoid giving feedback because they view it as being unsupportive. They see giving correcting feedback as being at odds with being a team player.

What do you think? Is giving someone corrective feedback at odds with being a team player? Are organizations better off without feedback?

If you or your team work in a *feedback-poor culture* because feedback is perceived to be at odds with being a team player, or other reasons, consider this – great teams encourage and compliment each other but they also help each other become better. They give each other tips, techniques, and principles to follow. They give each other ideas on how to continually improve. They maintain a *feedback-rich culture*. Top performing teams don't merely accept each other. They share their perceptions. They are not a loose collection of individuals who only care about themselves. They are a team of people who help, encourage, enable, and coach each other. They even hold each other accountable.

You may not like receiving or giving correcting feedback, but it is the vehicle through which people learn and grow. When given constructively and balanced with authentic encouragement, it is truly a gift that can last a lifetime. The only time that giving feedback is at odds with being a team player is when it is given with dishonorable intentions. For example, if feedback is given with the intent to hurt or discourage people, it changes from feedback to manipulation or disparagement. Otherwise, feedback is truly a gift of increased self-awareness.

Take a few minutes to assess yourself and your organization. How well and often do you give feedback? Do you only give it when conducting performance reviews? Or do you give feedback in real time when it is justified and appropriate? Do you have regular 1on1s that provide the opportunity to give both encouragement and coaching?



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Consider these principles when assessing how well you give feedback:

- **Be Polite:** Respect people's need to retain their dignity and self-assurance. Be considerate. In particular, if you don't know people well, you've not yet earned their trust and therefore haven't earned the right to give them correcting feedback. Rather than avoid giving it, however, ask their permission to give it. When in public, limit your feedback to praise only. Follow the principle "Praise in public, rebuke in private."
- **Start with a Compliment:** When the feedback you plan to give is correcting, start with a little praise. Praise, aka reinforcing feedback, garners trust and lowers your receiver's self-defense mechanism that kicks in unconsciously. After you give the initial compliment and make your transition to correcting feedback, be careful not to start with "but," which essentially invalidates everything you said before it. Say something like, "I want to add, however, that I believe you can do better, You can . . ."
- **Avoid Subjective Judgment:** When you give correcting feedback, use specific observations. Target the behavior, not the person. Avoid being judgmental. Don't label them. Don't become mired in differences of opinion by claiming unequivocally that you know what they did or why they did it. Stick to the facts and simply describe what you observed and your view of its impact. Ask for clarification and their perspective. Then move on to what they could do next time that you believe would be more appropriate. There are many more ways to do something wrong than right, so save your time and focus on the right ways.
- **Stay Constructive:** Keep your comments constructive. Do not cross the line that makes the other person shut down, turn defensive, or go on the attack. Once people feel attacked, they no longer take in your feedback. If you cross people's threshold for criticism, back off. Apologize. Offer to pick up the conversation again later if they are willing.
- **Ensure Understanding:** There is a significant difference between knowing something and understanding it. You might know that the sun sets every evening or that gravity keeps your feet on the floor, but understanding it is a different matter. If people are truly interested in what you have to say, they will ask follow-up questions to seek understanding. They may also want to explain themselves. Facilitate dialogue so the other person knows not only what to do but also why and how.

Consider these principles when assessing how well you receive feedback:

- **Ask for It:** If you hope to receive feedback on a regular basis, ask for it. Let your manager, peers, and others whom you trust know that you are working to better know and improve yourself. And that you would be grateful for their constructive and candid feedback.
- **Be Specific:** If you merely ask "how am I doing" expect to hear "Great." Instead, ask "what are the top 2-3 things you think I could do to be better?" Or "What can I do to be a better leader?" or "What can I do to be a better spouse?"
- **Be Open:** Be open and available for feedback. People won't give you feedback if you are not open to their ideas or make yourself available. While you might not adopt people's ideas, at least let people know you are open to their comments. Leave time on your schedule for casual conversation—within reasonable limits.
- **Seek Understanding:** When someone gives you feedback, listen intently. Seek to understand. Ask questions, probe, and clarify. If it is a criticism, don't defend yourself; instead, acknowledge their perspective. It will ensure you receive feedback again next time. Save your defense for false accusations.
- **Be Grateful:** Once you have received the feedback and understand it, say thanks. Tell your feedback providers that you appreciate their willingness to take the time to help you improve your self-awareness. Feedback is a gift and deserving of appreciation.
- **Don't Shoot the Messenger:** Never rebuke the feedback provider. Recognize that your feedback providers are doing what they think is right and hopefully trying to help you. Especially if you are in a senior position and receiving feedback from members of your team, be careful not to intimidate, overreact, or belittle your feedback providers. They will stop giving you feedback.



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- **Process Your Feelings:** Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, author of *On Death and Dying*, didn't have feedback in mind when she wrote about the five stages of grief. However, her model—with some adaptation—provides a framework for what many people go through emotionally when they receive correcting feedback. Here are ten different mental stages people can experience after receiving correcting feedback they had not previously known:
 1. Shock—"I can't believe what I just heard."
 2. Denial—"They must be mistaken. I don't do that."
 3. Pain—"It hurts to know that. I had no idea I was that bad."
 4. Anger or Anxiety—"This makes me mad. I feel so embarrassed."
 5. Bargaining or Rationalization—"I know I need to change and will if I can get a second chance" or "I know I need to change, but I'm not really that bad."
 6. Depression or Reflection—"I'm sad that I've let it get to this point."
 7. Examination—"What does this really mean? What do I need to do?"
 8. Acceptance—"I can't change what has happened, so I'm turning my attention to moving forward."
 9. Understanding—"I know what I need to do differently going forward and why I need to do it."
 10. Application—"I'm applying what I've learned."

When receiving correcting feedback, recognize when you are in the early mental stages. Strive to move as quickly as appropriate to the most beneficial stages: 7, 8, 9, and 10.

If you expect to be the best you can be, and for those in your circle of influence to be the best they can be, adopt these principles and enjoy the journey of continuous improvement.

The content of this article adapted from *Self: Setting the Example*, book 2 of the SCOPE of Leadership six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches.

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