



The Art and Science of Effective Feedback

Challenges to Receiving and Providing Feedback – and What to Do About It

Feedback. Just the very word can tie our stomachs in knots, whether we need to give it or have to receive it. In this article, we'll explore some of the reasons our brains struggle with this area of human interaction—and some strategies for doing it more effectively.

1) The Pain of Social Rejection

We evolved to live cooperatively, in small groups. It was the only way to survive for the 200,000 years we have been *homo sapiens*, and in our evolutionary history before that as well. Our need to belong is as real and pervasive—and as important to our survival—as hunger or thirst. (In fact, brain studies have shown that being rejected activates many of the same regions of the brain that are involved in physical pain.)

It makes sense if we think about this from an evolutionary perspective. In terms of sheer survival, we're always safer assuming threat than not, whether it is a stick-shaped snake that we jump away from, or a vague sense that this person may not like us. Our limbic system, responsible for scanning for threats (and therefore keeping us alive), is finely tuned to whether or not we are safely part of the group. Whether we are deemed acceptable or deficient. Whether we belong.

Feedback, even when well intentioned, can often trigger a limbic response. We think we should be responding rationally, but meanwhile deeply entrenched safety-driven neural pathways are screaming "threat!!" On a basic level, even if it isn't true in today's society, being left out of the group makes us fear for our very survival. This puts us in a mode where our higher brain shuts down, making it very hard to take in what the other person is saying. In other words, when feedback is given without relationship firmly in place, it often quite literally isn't heard.

WHAT TO DO: Get Authentically Connected

If you do nothing else, do this. When the person you are giving feedback to really knows they are safe, you have a LOT more room to say things and have them heard. As outlined above, a limbic (fight or flight) response takes our higher brain "offline" by flooding it with noradrenaline (the adrenalin of the brain), which makes us less

focused, present and able to create and retrieve memories. When connection and safety do not feel threatened, the higher brain stays available to process and make sense of the information.

We have also come to believe that there is actually little benefit to unsolicited feedback. It's like seeing a snake in the road – we react first and this makes it very hard to hear and interact with the feedback effectively. Context and relationship must be created before the feedback is given if you want it to have the most powerful, positive impact. Ideally, the person receiving the feedback will also have a choice as to whether or not they want to hear it (and when). Note: in terms of performance reviews and formal feedback structures, the choice was made as part of the terms of the job so people are somewhat more emotionally prepared for it.

2) We Tend to Listen from our Dominant Hemisphere

This can have a positive or negative effect depending on whether or not the person receiving feedback has gone into fight or flight or is staying present and open.

On the up side, the Left Hemisphere of the brain, highly dominant in the Western world today, brings the capacity for logic and rationality, thus analyzing feedback for what it is, taking what is helpful and leaving what is not.

On the other hand, the Left Hemisphere also has a tendency to eliminate things from its focus that do not fit with what it has already decided. In other words, if what you are telling me doesn't match what I already believe about myself, I may not take in your feedback at all. I may literally not hear or see it. Add this to the fact that the Left Hemisphere also has a strong bias towards positivity, and you get a strange sort of Teflon phenomenon, where the person is pointed towards areas of improvement and yet acts as if they can do no wrong and continues with their previous behavior.

In flight or fight mode, the Left Hemisphere also sees things in terms of competition and dominance, and this can lead to defensiveness and arguing with the feedback.

The Right Hemisphere, on the plus side, sees things in terms of the big picture, human connection and empathy. This is helpful when receiving feedback because the Right Hemisphere takes it in context, stay connected and have empathy for the impact we created.

On the down side the Right Hemisphere has tendency toward negativity and depression, and can take the person to a place of self-judgment where they invalidate themselves completely and want to give up. This hemisphere in fight or flight has a tendency to feel overwhelmed and lost in a chaotic emotional state where the value and the truth of the feedback is lost.

WHAT TO DO: Get the Opposite Hemisphere Activated in the Feedback Process (or, ideally, activate both)

A head to head battle with a person's Left Hemisphere is a losing proposition. If you are faced with someone who seems impervious to feedback (or fights and competes), use strategies to activate the more sensitive, empathic and receptive Right Hemisphere of their brain. A very simple non-threatening one is having them use a metaphor to reflect back the feedback they heard. This will activate the visual circuitry in their brain, which taps into their deeper awareness and understanding. (Note: it may take a skilled coach to get them to reflect in this way.)

For example, the feedback might be about the person having a strong, overwhelming impact in meetings. In debriefing this, their Left Hemisphere may be thinking "Well, what's wrong with that? I am a leader, and they can get out of the way!" If it ends there, they "got" the feedback, but it didn't make any difference.

If instead, they were asked for a metaphor, the person might say, "Ok, I guess I am an elephant! What's wrong with that?" A coach can then help them look at the experience of being an elephant, what is good about it, and what are the drawbacks? By using metaphor, the person is much more likely to begin to see that there may be limitations to this way of being which they are unaware of, leading to authentic motivation to change.

Of course, there are other strategies that will engage the person's Right Hemisphere as well – having them reflect on the bigger picture (wholistic thinking) and take different perspectives (activating empathy), are two other ways to create greater awareness.

To balance an over-activated Right Hemisphere, where the person is emotionally overwhelmed and invalidating themselves, it can be helpful to bring in logic and rationality. Having them reflect on where they are doing things well and have succeeded can bring them back to a state of openness and presence.

Additionally, the Left Hemisphere provides structure and accountability. Helping the person see a step-by-step plan for improvement also can create an energy of receptivity and hope, pulling them out of the emotional overwhelm.

If you are managing someone who has a tendency towards taking feedback in a overly emotional way (feedback will bring up emotions in most people—this is normal, natural and appropriate) OR who doesn't take it seriously at all, your best strategy is to have them tell on themselves. This does not tend to activate the limbic system, pushing us into fight or flight, but appeals to our higher brains which actually love to reflect.

3) Subjectivity, Culture and Personal Reference Points

Our feedback to someone often reveals more out ourselves than it does about the other person. For example, when we are asked to rate someone's behavior (such as in a 360 review), we tend to rate it in reference to ourselves. As Marcus Buckingham said in a 2011 article on 360 reviews, *"If you rate me high on setting a clear vision for our team, all we learn is that I am clearer on that vision than you are; if you rate me low, we learn*

*that you are clearer than I am.*¹ Buckingham calls this “bad data,” and says even if you have 20 people’s answers in a 360 review, 20 inputs of bad data don’t make a reliable report. Bad + bad does not equal good.

In addition, we tend to think that there is a right and wrong way to do things. Each culture (including the culture within an organization) has its own ideals. For example, if the ideal/assumption in your organization is that challenging people and “calling them on their BS” creates the most growth, and you personally believe more in nurturing and focusing on strengths, you’ll be given “feedback” that you are not measuring up. And you won’t be, but only relative to the ideal, which ultimately may or may not be effective.

WHAT TO DO: Provide Feedback in Terms of the Impact You Experienced

Buckinham adds “*Although you are not a reliable rater of my behavior, you are an extremely reliable rater of your own feelings and emotions.*” Thus, while you can’t necessarily trust your own judgment of my performance or behavior, you can trust the *impact* it had on you. This is good data, and although, as the saying goes “One swallow doesn’t make a summer,” adding good data to good data will provide a much more accurate read of what is going on.

Through studies in neuroscience, psychology, consciousness and even quantum physics, we are learning new things *daily* about how humans actually think and behave. Effectiveness is a moving target—what was promoted a few years ago as the key to success may not actually be so. As we develop our awareness we need to stay flexible and open as to whether we are stuck in a bias about what works and what doesn’t. This is another reason why providing feedback on the person’s impact is so important.

In conclusion

Providing truly effective feedback is an art and science. It requires awareness of the other person’s emotional state and a commitment to authentically connect with them. When feedback is done well, it can be one of the most powerful tools in a leader’s toolbox for effecting change and growth. When done poorly, it can lead to little change at best, and profound disengagement at worst. We hope these ideas will help you to take your feedback to the next level.

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¹ Buckingham, Marcus, *The Fatal Flaw with 360 Surveys*, Harvard Business Review, October 2011