

A Better Way to Process Negative Feedback

by

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How good is your boss at giving you feedback? Does he or she send you concrete, actionable messages about your behavior and performance in time to be useful? How about your colleagues and subordinates? Are they regularly giving you the open and accurate feedback that makes clear to you what you are doing well and what you need to do differently?

No? You are not alone: few people feel they are given enough useful feedback in time to help them succeed and develop. This is not surprising. Many managers feel uncomfortable praising others and especially dislike criticizing them. Most find giving negative feedback difficult to do well. Recognizing this, organizations have provided training for managers to help them get better at identifying the performance gaps and developmental needs of their employees and coaching their employees to better performance through constructive criticism. Much of the common advice about how best to give negative feedback, however, is unhelpful (see *Sidebar: Common, but unhelpful, advice about giving feedback*). The result is that, even after training, most managers are bad at it.

Meanwhile, the increasing use in companies of forced-ranking performance measurement systems and 360°-feedback programs means that people are giving each other more negative feedback than ever before. These initiatives are well-

intentioned, but they have the potential to do more harm than good. Inaccurate criticism—or, for that matter, accurate criticism that is poorly delivered—can mislead, wound, and even paralyze the person receiving it unless he or she is skilled at processing it.

Faced with this, some people are exceptionally good at drawing out useful information from low-quality feedback. We should learn from them because it may be easier to teach yourself how to process low-quality feedback than it is to teach others how to give you high-quality feedback. Of course, to the extent that organizations can help bosses, subordinates, and colleagues get better at giving each other negative feedback, they should continue to work to improve. We have some suggestions on this. However, there is immediate benefit to be gained from learning how to make constructive use of imperfect feedback. Our research, and our experience working with hundreds of executives on this subject, strongly suggest that it is possible to transform the vague, noisy, incomplete, biased, emotionally-charged, negative feedback that one often receives into something helpful. Executives adept at this kind of processing are skilled in knowing both what feedback they should pay attention to, and what they should ignore, and how to listen to feedback to avoid negative emotional side-effects and distill the information they can use.

<p>Advice</p> <p>Feedback should be descriptive, not evaluative</p>	<p>Criticize the behavior, do not criticize the person</p>	<p>Feedback should be given in the context of a leadership competency framework</p>	<p>Negative feedback should be balanced with positive feedback</p>
<p>Why unhelpful</p> <p>It is human nature to infer evaluative judgments in all feedback we receive.</p>	<p>Our behavior is an important part of who we are. When our behavior is criticized, we rightly take it personally.</p>	<p>Company-wide leadership competency frameworks are generic and assume that one size fits all. Different roles require different competencies. Competency gap analysis focuses attention on improving weaknesses rather than building on strengths.</p>	<p>Generic positive feedback sounds fake and is not believed. It may make things worse by reinforcing the impression that the positive feedback you give is not genuine but is used for effect and should be discounted.</p>
<p>Example</p> <p><i>"People were falling asleep yesterday during your presentation."</i> Taken literally, that is purely descriptive feedback. But how would you perceive it?</p>	<p><i>"We just got word that we didn't get the bid. That was a bad bit of negotiating you did yesterday. It cost us a lot of money. Let's sit down now and talk about how I can help you improve."</i></p>	<p><i>"You score lower than the average of your peers on creativity and ability to inspire others."</i></p>	<p><i>"You are a nice guy, and everybody likes you. But I am hearing from the members of your team, and from other voices in the company, that your leadership is weak. You need to work on that."</i></p>
<p>Grain of truth</p> <p>Good feedback is descriptive and concrete, but it is also evaluative.</p>	<p>Good feedback is behavioral, not psychological, and it is specific, not general.</p>	<p>Good feedback is tailored to the specific skills and behaviors required in the particular role the person is in.</p>	<p>Good feedback sets criticism about a specific issue clearly in perspective of how the person is performing overall.</p>
<p>What to do</p> <p>Acknowledge that the reason you are giving feedback is because you have formed an evaluation. Take responsibility for your opinion and be open to the possibility that your opinion is incorrect or incomplete.</p>	<p>It is more helpful to tell someone she negotiated poorly yesterday because she didn't seem to be listening to the potential buyers than to say she is a bad negotiator because she never listens. But, acknowledge that, when you give negative feedback to someone, that person has a right to feel bad about it. Give them time and space to process those feelings.</p>	<p>Tell the individual what specific task he is not being sufficiently creative in his approach and why this is important. Be specific with him or her about where his or her people are showing too little inspiration and what he or she might do to inspire them more.</p>	<p>If people deserve positive feedback as well as negative feedback, give it to them as specifically as possible. Then be equally specific in your negative feedback.</p> <p>Remember that your objective shouldn't be to sugarcoat your negative feedback but to provide the accurate mixture of positive and negative feedback that matches their performance.</p>
<p>Example:</p> <p><i>"I found your presentation yesterday hard to follow and I think others may have too. I was expecting more structure at the beginning, such as an outline of what you were going to cover."</i></p>	<p><i>"We just got word that we didn't get the bid. You didn't negotiate well yesterday. Take some time and think through what you can learn from this. When you are ready, we can talk."</i></p>	<p><i>"In your sales approaches, you seem to always go by the book. If you listened more to your client and understood better what they really want, you might be able to offer them more attractive packages. Your subordinates seem to do what they are told but they aren't proactively taking ownership of their client relationships. Have you considered giving them more flexibility to see if they respond?"</i></p>	<p><i>"Your subordinates have told me that they learn a lot from you about promotional approaches. They think you are a marketing genius and they tell me how much you have done to help them increase their sales. Their results speak for themselves. I'm impressed. The next level of improvement is going to come from bringing your team up to size. On this issue, your people say that you are not doing a great job in recruiting and selecting the right people to join the sales team."</i></p>

Sidebar: Common, but unhelpful, advice about giving feedback (and what to do instead)

Our Research

There are challenges in processing both positive and negative feedback, but we focused our research on negative feedback—such as criticisms, complaints, and suggestions for improvement—because making good use of that is typically more difficult. We asked executives attending leadership development courses at INSEAD to provide us with examples of functional and dysfunctional negative feedback messages they had received. We defined these as follows:

A **functional** negative feedback message is one that you are able to use to improve your performance.

A **dysfunctional** negative feedback message is one that does more harm than good.

We asked the executives to tell us about their job at the time; their relationship with the person who gave them the feedback; the content of the feedback; and, in detail, why it was functional or dysfunctional.

Reading over the responses, we were immediately struck by the fact that a considerable number of executives, almost 20%, reported that they had never received dysfunctional negative feedback or that they believed there was no such thing as dysfunctional negative feedback. Our own experience told us that negative feedback can indeed be dysfunctional, even deeply harmful to an individual’s self-confidence, self-esteem, and ability to trust others. Psychological texts are full of examples of the profoundly destructive effects of negative messages, especially from central authority figures such as a parent

or a boss. So, we interviewed a sample of these executives to learn whether they were fooling themselves, trying to fool us, or whether there was something going on that we didn’t understand. We asked them to describe episodes in which they had been given feedback that was of low quality, inaccurate, and poorly delivered, and to explain how they had made productive use of it.

When we compared the responses of these executives with the descriptions that other executives had provided of dysfunctional feedback episodes, we found that there were striking differences along two dimensions. The first is about what feedback the executives listened to and paid attention to—and what they ignored. The second is about how they reacted to those messages they paid attention to— and what actions they decided to take in response.

We found that along both the *what* and *how* dimensions lies a continuum. Most people find themselves at one extreme or the other most of the time, but those with unusual skill seem to be able to operate well-balanced in the middle. At one end of the *what* continuum lie managers who are **ignorant** of the feedback they receive, be it loud or subtle, and seem unable to see, hear, or sense the negative messages sent by people around them. At the other end are those managers who are **hypersensitive** to negative messages from others and hear damning whispers where there is only silence. The *how* continuum runs from the extreme of those managers who are **defensive** and respond to negative messages with counterproductive counter-attack, and those who become **hypnotized** and paralyzed by negative feedback messages.

1. Knowing what negative feedback to listen to		
Ignorant	Fine-tuned	Hypersensitive
2. Knowing how to listen to negative feedback		
Defensive	Emotionally Intelligent	Hypnotized

Sidebar: The two dimensions of effectively processing negative feedback

Between these extremes, we found people with the extraordinary ability to remain well-balanced in the way they tune into negative feedback, the way they listen to it, and the way they decide to respond to it. They are able to pay attention to useful negative feedback that is widely available but that less skilled colleagues tend to ignore, while not being distracted by negative feedback that seems to demand attention but doesn't deserve it. For the criticisms, complaints, and suggestions for improvement that they choose to tune into, they are able to listen without getting defensive but also without losing perspective on their strengths or becoming hypnotized by the negative feedback. Finally, they are able to use the relevant information they extract to choose an appropriate response to deal with whatever is working poorly for them.

Knowing *What* Negative Feedback to Listen to

Most of us at some time fall into one of the two unproductive extremes of either paying too little attention to the negative feedback we are receiving from those around us ("You just don't get it!") or paying too much attention to it ("You are making a mountain out of a molehill!"). Staying fine-tuned is difficult.

Avoiding Ignorance

Consider Carol Brown, one of the executives in our study. Carol was the head of a project team in charge of getting FDA approval for a pharmaceutical product. She told us:

"The process had lasted two years and had involved a large number of people. When we got the compound approved I felt very happy and very relieved. And I decided to congratulate people by sending everybody an e-mail. I was also particularly happy because the final phase of this process had been very long and very stressful and it had made it impossible for me to move into a new project that I was very enthusiastic about. My e-mail was only three lines long:

After two years of very hard work from everybody, we got FDA approval. In the name of the Company, I want to thank each one of you and express my appreciation for the quality of your work.

"I immediately jumped into the new project. A few days later Peter Larsson, one of the people who had received my e-mail, told me that I should

have been more enthusiastic. Just that email wasn't enough. I did not pay any attention. I thought, 'Oh well, what really matters is that we got FDA approval,' and I got back to work.

"During the next months I found it difficult to convince some excellent people to join my new team. I thought that it was only natural since there is always a lot of competition for the best performers.

"Then, six months later, Jean Richardson, the Head of Training in our HR Department told me: 'I know from our discussions that you really care about the people in your group. But those same people have a different impression. They have told me that you are tough and results driven and that you do not show enough heart.'

"That got me to think again about Peter's comments. I reread the e-mail I sent to congratulate the team. I realized that I had just spelled out the facts. And I had said "thank you." Nothing more. Not a single extra word. I had not found anything missing. But other people did. And I had not noticed their unhappiness. I had even dismissed Peter's explicit feedback. Since that incident, I have tried to be more expressive. But it does not seem to work. At least, not yet."

It took Carol six months to get the message that some felt that her approach was too cold. She only heard that feedback at all because Jean intervened in a skillful way to provide her the information. Her earlier ignorance wasn't because people weren't giving her feedback and it wasn't because the feedback she was receiving wasn't straightforward. It was simply because she was unaware of the consequences of tuning out the reactions of others to her email. She learned that lesson, but, as she says, she is unsure how to apply that learning to other situations. Being sensitive to the feedback she is getting every day remains and unnatural act for her.

Carol's situation is not uncommon. When we teach executives how to give and receive feedback, we often start with the following exercise. Try it yourself. Take out a sheet of paper and a pencil and write down the following:

What are the things that the people in your life—your boss, your colleagues, your subordinates, even your spouse or children—are shouting at you to change about yourself?

Every executive we have worked with has at least one item to put on that list, feedback they have

heard but that they are ignoring. Common messages are things such as: “You don’t listen to me,” “I feel you don’t trust me,” “You try to control me too much,” or, “You are not there to support me when I need you.” For only a few of us is the problem that we don’t receive enough negative feedback. **The problem is that we systematically ignore much of the most important feedback we receive.** Often the major benefit of a formal 360° feedback exercise is not that it provides new information. Rather, it is that it imposes an obligation to pay attention to what you already knew people are thinking and to decide what to do about it.

Avoiding Hypersensitivity

There is, of course, a good reason that we sometimes ignore negative feedback. Very simply: **Much of the feedback we get deserves to be ignored.** Effective leadership requires a thick skin. A leader overly sensitive to criticism risks being distracted and pulled in too many directions and becoming unable to hold firm to his or her vision of what needs to be done. Yet the leader who cuts himself or herself off completely from feedback is in danger of losing touch with reality. Effectiveness requires finding the fine-tuned balance.

As one executive explained, one of the most important leadership competencies is a sensitive BS detector. And, according to him, he had to use it constantly. We would argue that in addition to recognizing and ignoring the toxic feedback dropped by bulls (BS), effective fine-tuning requires also recognizing and ignoring the negative feedback deposited by chickens (CS). The difference is subtle, but important, as anyone who has put a foot wrong in either can attest. It takes different types of awareness to avoid them.

Detecting BS

Some BS is very easy to detect. For example, pompous, generic criticism connected with the latest fashions about what makes a good leader is BS. Vague feedback such as, “You lack vision,” or “you don’t have the ability to inspire others,” needs to be ignored because it is entirely unhelpful. If the giver of the feedback cannot be more specific and concrete, then it is harmful to waste time trying to make sense of such comments and worrying about them.

Other forms of BS can be harder to spot and avoid. None of us is perfect. Each of us has flaws and weaknesses. If you are unaware of a flaw or weakness that is important in your job, then it is useful—though uncomfortable—to have it pointed out to you. *However, it is neither possible nor necessary to eliminate every flaw and weakness.* It may be better to focus your energies on building your strengths to compensate for your weaknesses, or to find a style of work that minimizes the impact of the flaws you know exist in yourself, or to surround yourself with people who are strong where you are weak to achieve balance. In such cases, you must not be side-tracked by feeling the need to respond to criticisms of weaknesses for which you have learned to compensate rather than eliminate.

Recently, one of us was coaching a top executive in a consumer goods company. Her name was Ana Ciarelli. During our work together she said that she was quite concerned because, in the most recent 360° feedback exercise, she got the message from a good number of her subordinates that she was not a good listener. She said that she was very worried about this. From that point on the dialogue proceeded as follows:

Coach: How long have you worked with these subordinates?

Ana: Two years.

Coach: What were you working on with them?

Ana: We worked on a very big project to reposition our products in the market. Consumers used to see our products as low prestige because they had a relatively low price. We managed to change radically the image of our product line through a very complex advertising and promotional campaign, and we increased our profitability spectacularly.

Coach: Who came up with that idea?

Ana: I did. But I couldn’t have implemented it without the support of my team. They did magnificent work.

Coach: So, this was a great success.

Ana: It was.

Coach: And your subordinates are happy with the team and with your leadership?

Ana: Overall, yes.

Coach: So why are you concerned about this element of their feedback?

Ana: *Because they are telling me that I have an important weakness.*

Coach: *Did it prove to be important in that project?*

Ana: *No.*

Coach: *Do you think it is important now?*

Ana: *No. But maybe it could become important...*

Formal 360° feedback processes are designed to generate both positive and negative feedback. By focusing so much on this one negative point, Ana was evaluating herself not by looking at her excellent results but by comparing herself against a certain model of what a manager should do—or, even worse, against a model of the kind of person a manager should be. Part of that ideal model is that a good manager should listen to one's subordinates. But the ideal manager is also able to come up with brilliant ideas and persist with them through execution. In principle, these two things—listening to others while staying focused on the task—are not incompatible. In practice, however, they often are.

Ana came up with a great idea because she spent a lot of time thinking about the products she managed. That time came at the expense of time she could have spent being a better listener.

Realistically, would her team have been more successful had she spent her time differently? Realistically, would her subordinates actually prefer to work for someone who listens to them more or for a very smart manager who has great ideas? These are the questions Ana needs to ask to gain perspective on the negative feedback she received.

Detecting CS

Mark Twain said that everyone talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it. This seems to be the case everywhere: even in sunny San Diego it is said that you can tell the natives because they are the ones complaining about the weather. People complain about work nearly as often as about weather and for largely the same reason. People like to complain. They need something to complain about. This is not true of all people, of course, and certainly not all the time, but it is important to be able to distinguish between complaints that arise from two very different motivations. Sometimes people complain to provoke a change in the behavior of others and address a grievance or right a wrong. That is the most obvious reason to complain, but

in the organizations we have studied it is not always the most common reason that people complain. After all, what sort of response are we hoping for when we complain to someone about the weather? We don't believe that our words will have meteorological power nor, typically, are we asking for help in how to move ourselves to a better climate. Instead, we complain about the weather to break the ice with someone or to carry along a conversation. Complaints like these—CS complaints—have a social function. **They draw people together with their expression of shared experience and shared suffering.** They put people at ease with one another through the comforting ritual of their recital. People make CS complaints not to provoke change but to strengthen the social bonds between us and others.

Surprisingly, complaints can sometimes be more powerful than the traditional tools used to boost alignment and loyalty in a company, such as corporate visioning and mission statements. One of us has spent years studying a large British bank whose employees are fond of complaining about everything—their bureaucratic culture, their leadership, their technology, their processes. They even complain about how much complaining they all do. Complaining has become a ritual, a part of the culture. To belong is to have the right to complain, at least occasionally. At one point, the bank undertook a large-scale rollout of its new corporate vision to become, “first choice for customers, investors, and staff.” Periodically, headquarters sent motivational videos to every branch and department to remind employees of the vision and to update them on its implementation. Uniformly of high polish and starring senior executives alongside a well-known BBC newsreader, the videos were gently satirized by management and staff alike. Mannerisms were mocked, clothing critiqued, errors highlighted, and executive waffling snorted at. Managers would preface viewings with apologies for the material and would typically join in the good-natured fun that followed. The videos did promote bonding, though admittedly not in the way the CEO had intended.

Successful managers in the bank develop an ear for complaint that we can learn from. They develop the skill to recognize two things. First, when they make the mistake of taking CS at face value and initiate changes to address this kind of negative feedback, their people respond sim-

ply by finding something new to complain about. If a group finds solidarity in complaining about the boss, there will always be something about him or her worthy of critique. Second, they recognize that CS is light and slippery, not heavy and sticky. One day the complaint is about a manager being heavy-handed and micro-managing. Another day it is that she expects results without giving enough direction on how to achieve them. One day the complaint is that a manager takes too many risks. Another day it is that he is not aggressive enough in developing business. This is the nature of CS: damned if you do and damned if you don't. Understand and appreciate this feedback for what it is: a ritual with valuable social functions. But don't waste time responding to it. A great deal of time and energy can be liberated and redirected to productive activity by the manager who is able

to detect CS and smile at it without being distracted by it.

Knowing *How* to Listen to Negative Feedback

Avoiding Getting Defensive

Once you have tuned into the feedback that is relevant and filtered out the feedback that needs to be ignored, the next step is to understand how to listen to the relevant negative feedback to allow yourself to process it effectively. Too much of the advice given about how to receive negative feedback is unrealistic. "Listen with an open-mind. Accept the feedback as a gift. Don't take it personally. Don't become emotional. Focus on the content." This advice is not wrong.

Normal Practice: Emotional	Better Practice: Emotionally Intelligent
The receiver feels attacked and mentally prepares to respond in kind.	The receiver may feel attacked but does not counter-attack.
The receiver's negative emotional reaction shuts down genuine communication.	The receiver allows the giver to provide as much information as he/she wants.
The receiver responds defensively before truly understanding the feedback.	The receiver pays attention and records mentally, or even takes notes about, what he/she is hearing.
The receiver questions the accuracy of the data supporting the feedback.	The receiver, eventually, processes on his/her own the information, evaluating its accuracy and usefulness.
The receiver questions the motives of the feedback giver.	The receiver considers all information as potentially relevant. The giver may have treated him/her unfairly, the feedback may be unjustified and based on inaccurate assumptions, but the fact that he/she feels angry or hurt or disappointed enough to give the feedback is extremely relevant.
The receiver provides explanations and additional data that the feedback giver dismisses as rationalization or excuses.	The receiver tries to identify the underlying operational problem and find a solution, alone or with others, to minimize or solve that problem.
The receiver of feedback counters by offering negative feedback about the giver and often questions his/her motives, fairness, impartiality, etc.	The receiver counts to 100 to control his or her emotions.
The emotional tone worsens.	The emotional tone remains neutral.
The destructive exchange escalates.	The receiver takes the emotional expressions of the giver as data that cannot be argued about but needs to be understood and managed.
The giver of feedback feels criticized and treated unfairly. The loop may start again at the top, this time with the roles reversed.	The giver feels listened-to and the two work together either to solve the problem or to overcome their disagreement about what the problem is.

Sidebar: Comparison of normal and better practices for reacting to negative feedback

Any executive with an extremely high degree of emotional intelligence would be able to follow it.

But people with such emotional intelligence are rare and, anyway, don't need advice to process negative feedback successfully. It is the rest of us who can benefit from guidance about how to improve the way we listen to poorly-delivered negative feedback. And for the rest of us, especially when it comes to feedback about areas of our life that are of central importance to us, just telling us to implement this best practice asks too much.

If best practice is unrealistic, better practice should be the goal. In our study, we were able to separate out and compare the elements of how people normally practice listening to negative feedback and a better practice of doing so.

Most of us have, at one time or another, reacted defensively to negative feedback. This is a normal reaction but its effect is typically to turn potentially useful feedback into something unhelpful and even harmful. What surprised us in our research was that the executives who had a systematically better way of processing negative feedback were not exceptional in their overall

level of emotional intelligence. They did, however, have a set of skills that enabled them to leverage their emotional intelligence to listen and squeeze valuable information out of negative feedback that most of their peers would find threatening and dismiss as unfounded, unfair, politically-motivated, or mean-spirited.

Tom Norwich, the Customer Service Director of a large US-based electronics firm is an example. An episode involving two of his subordinates—Poindexter and Mitchell—illustrates Tom's skill. Poindexter felt that Mitchell was under-performing and that this bad performance was having an impact on the whole team. He came to Tom to complain about it. Tom explains:

"I was already aware of Mitchell's poor performance, and I had previously discussed with my boss the possibility of moving him out of my team. My boss had pointed out, though, that Mitchell had connections through his father to a member of our company's Board. She advised me to handle the situation very carefully. Given the politics involved, I was working hard to try to help Mitchell improve his performance through coaching and training and so forth. I was in the midst

	Definition*	Importance for Processing Negative Feedback
Self-Awareness	The ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effects on others.	If you are not able to recognize your own feelings when receiving feedback—pain, surprise, disappointment, anger, a desire to retaliate, or whatever—you will not be able to manage them.
Self-Regulation	The ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods. The propensity to suspend judgment—to think before acting.	Ideally, one should be able to self-regulate "on-line," but this may be too difficult for many of us. If the feelings experienced when receiving negative feedback are too intense, your only reasonable option may be to count to 100 and then ask for time to do the necessary analytical work and prepare a more appropriate response.
Motivation	A passion to work for reasons that go beyond money or status. A propensity to pursue goals with energy and persistence.	You will only do the necessary processing work if you are truly committed to make the relationship as effective as possible.
Empathy	The ability to understand the emotional makeup of other people. Skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions.	You need the ability to recognize other people's emotions. Don't waste too much time trying to figure out where they come from. Try instead to figure out what specific incidents or behaviors usually trigger them.

* Daniel Goleman, "What Makes a Leader," *Harvard Business Review*, 1998.

Sidebar: The dimensions of emotional intelligence and negative feedback

of this process with him when Poindexter first came to me. I found myself agreeing with Poindexter, but felt I shouldn't say anything.

"Two months later, Poindexter came to see me again. He was quite upset and told me rather emotionally that 'the fact that you are not acting on Mitchell's poor performance is seen by your team as a weakness on your part, as a sign that you tolerate under performance, and that you do not have the guts to confront tough situations. You have to do something about this!'

"I had a perfectly rational explanation for how I had managed Mitchell's performance, but Poindexter was completely unaware of the political situation, and I thought I should not mention it to him. Poindexter's remarks made me angry because when he said that he was just feeding back to me what 'other people' were saying about me, I thought that he was actually expressing his own feelings. And I knew that the accusation that I was weak was both inaccurate and unfair. There have been many occasions in my career where I have taken tough decisions. I could have told him about them to prove my point.

"Poindexter's feedback was an insult to my leadership and it was misinformed, naive, and plain wrong. But despite all that, his feedback truly helped me.

"What his comments made me realize is that—and this may sound stupid—I had always focused mostly on the impact of my *behavior* on others. I had tended not to analyze as carefully the impact of what I *didn't* do. From that moment on, I decided to examine more carefully the potential negative effects of the choices I *didn't* make.

"In this specific case, I was already in the process of carefully documenting Mitchell's poor performance. And, when the next evaluation came along, we got rid of him. By the way, I heard that his father got him another job quite quickly."

Tom does not possess an exceptional gift of emotional intelligence, and he is by no means a perfect manager: it took him a good deal of time to discover the potential impact of his inaction. But, in this episode, he was able to leverage his emotional intelligence in four ways:

1. Though he was angered by Poindexter's aggressive tone and by the unfairness and inaccuracy of his feedback, Tom did not get defensive. He controlled the natural tendency we all share to respond emotionally and argumentatively to somebody who we perceive as attacking us.

2. By controlling his emotional response, he was able to find what was valuable in Poindexter's feedback: "Some people are upset by your inaction and it is raising questions about your leadership." Rather than focusing on the areas where this feedback was inaccurate—as a description of Tom's style and motives—he focused on the area where the feedback was accurate: as a description of the perceptions of others. Tom, probably accurately, sensed that "people" might be a code word for "I" in Poindexter's statement. But Tom saw that this was irrelevant. The feedback on perceptions could be equally useful to him either way.
3. Having analyzed the situation well, Tom took appropriate action and, more importantly, he learned a broader lesson from the experience: "Inaction may have as many consequences to consider as does action".
4. Finally, he had no problem admitting: "This may sound stupid," but he had not thought about analyzing the impact of inaction. This is an indication of Tom's self-awareness, a very positive attribute and one that is key for turning feedback into learning. **The first step of learning is admitting that there is something we didn't know. The first step towards improvement is admitting that we are doing something wrong.** That first step can be the hardest to take.

Few of us will understand immediately the true feelings and facts involved in every situation. As with Tom, it may take time to discover how best to resolve the issue. What Tom did was to avoid making things worse—by not flying off the handle when Poindexter came to him, by not engaging in a mutual blaming match with him, and by not ignoring or dismissing it. This gave Tom the chance to solve the problem and to learn.

Avoiding Being Hypnotized

When we act defensively in response to negative feedback, we deny ourselves the opportunity to benefit from it. When we lower our defenses, however, and listen to negative feedback with an open mind, we risk being hypnotized by it. The evidence from decades of research in social psychology is that human beings overemphasize, overrate, and over-remember the criticism they receive and downplay, discount or even disregard altogether the praise they also receive. This may be why we are so prone to be deaf to criticism or defensive about it: we develop protective mechanisms against the out-sized harm to our self-esteem that negative feedback can inflict.

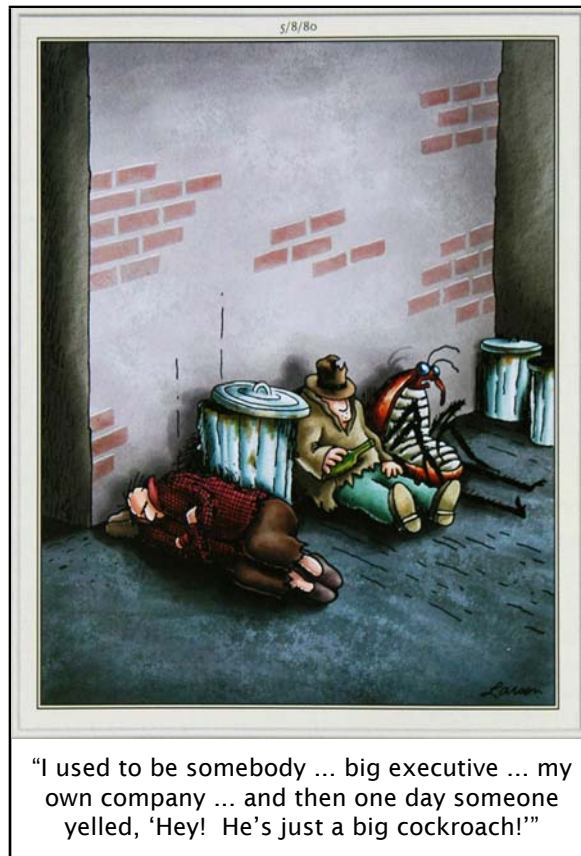
The hypnosis of criticism occurs when we lose perspective and place more importance on a piece of negative feedback than it deserves. We obsess over it. We find ourselves unable to stop thinking about it. Paradoxically, this can happen even when we believe the criticism is inaccurate or unfair. We are especially at risk of being hypnotized by negative feedback from someone who is very important in our lives and has a great influence on how we see ourselves: a boss, a mentor, a husband or wife, a son or daughter. The risk increases the more central the issue is to our self-image. Being accused by a boss of weak leadership or of an inability to understand other people can be extremely disturbing. Being accused of selfishness or infidelity by somebody we love can be worse. The trouble is that we are often hypnotized to a degree even by criticism far less all-encompassing and devastating. Sometimes just a rebuke, a mediocre performance review, or a small comment in a 360° evaluation saying, "Has a hard time working with others," can make us depressed, undermine our self-confidence and motivation, and cause us hours of distracted thought.

The only solution derives from the fact that it takes a solid ego to listen to criticism without being hypnotized by it.

The more insecure we are in general, the less able we are to put any given piece of negative feedback in its correct perspective. For this reason, your ability to listen effectively to external negative feedback is linked to your ability to listen effectively to external positive feedback and to generate internal positive feedback as well.

Many organizational feedback systems are designed as if managers have an overly optimistic or positive view of themselves and are primarily

in need of more negative feedback to give them a more realistic perspective on themselves. Our experience, to the contrary, is that many managers have a rather fragile self-esteem and that this is an important factor preventing them effectively processing negative feedback. Successful executives are often people who have internalized perfectionist models of what kind of person they should be and who have been deeply influenced by overly demanding authority figures such as parents and teachers. Surprised at their success, such executives may subconsciously fear being exposed as overrated and a fraud.



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Under relentless pressure to produce, their performance influenced by external factors they cannot control—from general economic conditions and increasing globalization to the priorities and performance of other groups inside and out of the organization—hearing a stream of negative messages from performance systems designed to be critical, seeing around them the casualties of failed careers, a lack of self-confidence, anxiety, and even fear in corporations is hardly surprising. At a conscious level, most managers find ways to cope, even if only through denial. At an unconscious level, however, these feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem and fear persist and shape the way they hear and interpret feedback.

The point is that it is extremely important for people learn to identify their strengths, to value their achievements and to digest the positive feedback that they may get from others. The executive who is able to do this will be much more able and willing to listen to negative feedback without feeling demotivated or profoundly threatened by it. Yet, the process of recognizing your strengths, and even praising yourself, is seldom as easy as it sounds. Most of us feel phony and uncomfortable doing this. We view it as an exercise in nar-

cissism or a form of self-indulgence. Too often we take our qualities, strengths, and skills for granted. The person who speaks only one language, for example, appreciates the extraordinary skill required to speak three languages. The trilingual takes it for granted.

There is a skill required to process positive feedback. First, we need to be able to distinguish between flattery and authentic positive feedback to know what positive feedback to listen to. Second, just as with negative feedback, we need to know how to listen to positive feedback. We must be able to interpret the meaning and practical significance of the praise we receive.

One of the executives we work with, Anne Bowlan, was told by her CEO that her presentation to the board “was brilliant.” She found this nice to hear, but fairly useless as feedback because it did not give her any sense of why it had been brilliant. Was it because it was well-structured and clear? Was it her style, her sense of humor, the metaphors she used? Some combination of all of these? Something else entirely? How could she learn from this to make better presentations. She couldn’t. But the feedback wasn’t useless. What it could help her recognize is that she is very good at this type of presentation. Secure in that realization, she will be better placed to process constructive criticism she may receive about future presentations she gives.

A story related by John Beckham, an executive in our study, provides an example of how the ability to process positive feedback about yourself can help you avoid the hypnosis of negative feedback.

“I will never forget the performance discussion I had with my boss, Peter, when he told me that I seemed to be doing well but that he hadn’t made up his mind about what he thought about me. ‘The jury is still out on you,’ he said. That comment seriously disturbed me. The metaphor was scary. A jury can only come out with two verdicts: Guilty or Not Guilty. Neither sounded very positive. Anyway, what did he mean? What was I accused of? Was he searching for data to condemn me? I was very worried by the conversation and couldn’t stop thinking about it.

I finally decided I needed to confide in someone about this. I spoke with a colleague I was close to

about the whole episode. He told me, “Forget about it. You have produced excellent result. Focus on keeping that up, and remember that you have plenty of allies in this company that like you and respect you. Don’t get stuck on trying to impress Peter.”

He talked on in detail, reminding me of the support I had and the visibility my results had received, to persuade me he wasn’t just being nice. And it was excellent advice. I was able to follow it, and it worked. I’ll tell you, though, I couldn’t truly get rid of my concern about Peter’s words. The fact that I am telling you this story today, five years later, tells you how much it bothered me then and that, at some level, it still bothers me today.”

All bosses evaluate their subordinates. That is part of their job. In some sense, then, the jury is always out on all of us. Yet, there is a big difference between knowing that you are being evaluated and being told explicitly, “I am judging you.” Peter meant to send a worrying message to John with that comment—to unsettle him—and it worked. In doing so, he revealed nothing useful about John’s performance, but he revealed a great deal about himself and about what sort of boss he is. An important dimension of emotional intelligence is to be able to recognize characters like this and defend ourselves against their destructive influence. Their feedback is poison.

We might be tempted, then, to criticize John for allowing himself to be emotionally affected by this feedback and not ignoring it as a dysfunctional message of distrust. Pragmatically, though, he coped. He avoided the worst effects of hypnosis by finding support from other people to help him. This was possible only because he had previously established positive relationships with others in the organization and because he had the courage to believe more in the positive messages of a colleague, supported by evidence, than the negative messages of a boss, mired in neurosis. John won’t ever forget Peter’s words and what sort of manager Peter showed himself to be, but rather than being devastated by it, this incident has made him feel more secure about the support he has in the company and more sure about the best way to keep it. Knowing who to listen to, and who to ask for advice, may often be the most important skill of all.

Conclusion

Here is our basic argument. Making useful sense of low-quality negative feedback is difficult but possible and vitally important. Most people are bad at giving negative feedback, but accurate

information about how we are doing and how others perceive us is so important that it behooves us to improve how we process noisy, poorly-delivered feedback rather than to wait for others to improve how they give it.

First stage	
DO	Listen to both the facts and feelings being communicated in the feedback
DO NOT	React quickly to it: Do not interrupt; do not argue; do not defend yourself
DO	Pay attention: Try to record what you are being told
DO NOT	Try to evaluate the information at that time: Don't classify it into accurate/inaccurate, fair/unfair, relevant/irrelevant at this point
DO	Ask for time to process the messages
Second stage	
DO	List the negative messages from the person who has given you the feedback
DO	List the positive messages from that person
STOP!	If there are only negative messages, consider what that means about the emotions of the feedback giver
DO	Separate facts from feelings in the messages
DO	Decide what is accurate and what is inaccurate
DO NOT	Waste time worrying about BS or CS
Third stage	
DO	Put criticism in context
DO	List the negative messages you would give yourself
DO	List the positive messages you would give yourself
DO	List the positive and negative messages you have heard from the feedback giver in the past
DO	Consider the positive and negative feedback you receive from others: colleagues, mentors, subordinates
DO NOT	Allow yourself to be hypnotized by negative messages or discount positive messages just because they are positive

Sidebar: Summary advice for a better way of processing negative feedback

This means developing two skills. First, the fine-tuned skill of filtering out the BS and CS that litter most organizations so that you can pay attention to the important negative messages that people are already shouting at you. Second, the emotionally-intelligent skill of listening to negative feedback without getting defensive but also without letting yourself be hypnotized by it.

This means hearing what the other has to say without being consumed by it. Recognize that the basis for healthy processing of negative feedback from others is the secure acceptance of positive feedback from others and also from within yourself. Until you understand what you are doing well you cannot learn from what you are doing poorly and decide how to improve.

Too much of the advice that is commonly given about how to give and receive feedback is not psychologically realistic. It is based on utopian assumptions of rationality and self-control. Feedback is inherently judgmental. Negative feedback is inherently personal. There is no getting around that and the emotional responses it provokes. It is no good merely exhorting man-

agers to be mature and take feedback constructively: Processing negative feedback requires skills that must be developed.

The message for organizations and HR professionals is that the increasing use of 360°-feedback systems and the time and energy devoted to encouraging people to provide each other with negative feedback is likely to do as much harm as good. Managers do not need more feedback. What managers need is the ability to process the feedback already right in front of their eyes and being shouted in their ears. Indeed, the deeper problem may be that managers receive so much feedback from others about how they are doing, and what they should be doing about it, that they lose the ability of self-assessment, of deciding for themselves how they feel about what they have accomplished and how they want to manage their professional life. The irony is that it is just this ability to accurately self-assess that is the key requirement for developing the skills of filtering, listening to, and learning from the feedback of others.