

# How to Deal With Negative Feedback



## What you should learn from this article:

- Why people avoid negative feedback
- Tips for accepting negative feedback
- Next steps

# INTRODUCTION

Feedback – giving employees information about their performance (DeNisi & Kluger, 2000) – can help employees change and develop. However, this doesn't always happen. Kluger and DeNisi (1996) found that only 1/3 of feedback interventions resulted in behavioural change. This is especially probable when giving negative feedback. Negative feedback can produce a host of defensive reactions, resulting in rejection of the feedback and subsequent lack of performance change. So, how can negative feedback have the intended impact?

## WHY DO WE AVOID NEGATIVE FEEDBACK?

We first need to understand why people so often recoil from negative feedback. Part of the explanation is that employees often make sense of negative feedback in terms of the person they are, instead of about the task the feedback is about (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Kluger & DeNisi 1998). Perceiving feedback as an attack on one's self concept, instead of about a job task, can result in rejection of the feedback, particularly if they believe it is misaligned with how they think of themselves (Brett and Atwater, 2001).

## HOW TO DEAL WITH NEGATIVE FEEDBACK:

### Intepreting the Feedback

There are a variety of tools we can use to help us become more receptive to, and accepting of, negative feedback.

When we receive negative feedback, we should be asking ourselves three questions (Stone & Heen, 2015):

- What do I feel?
- What's the story I'm telling myself?
- What's the actual feedback?

These questions allow us to focus on the feedback given, instead of on the feelings and stories we tell ourselves that go along with that feedback. First, acknowledge how you feel. Then, separate the feedback from the story you are telling yourself.

Stone and Heen (2015) also suggest considering the advice you'd give to someone whose received the same negative feedback you were given. This is a good strategy for accepting feedback and deciding actions to take on it.

In a similar manner, try to imagine the feedback from the perspective of the person writing it. This forces you to think about the situation from how other people see it, which can mitigate the biases and tunnel vision you might have when seeing a situation from your perspective alone. Additionally, research shows that engaging in perspective taking results in understanding others better, remembering opinions longer, and thinking about the feedback during follow-up conversations (Sessa, 1996).

A person's mindset also influences the impact of negative feedback (Stone & Heen, 2015). Research shows that negative feedback can predict disengagement from goals, but interestingly, that relationship weakens when people have a growth mindset (Hu, Hood, & Creed, 2017). Having a growth mindset means that an individual believes their abilities can be developed while having a fixed mindset means that they believe their abilities are pre-set (Haimovitz & Dweck, 2017.) Understanding that there is opportunity to grow and develop can make you more open to accepting negative feedback.

When reviewing negative feedback, it is important to read the positive comments before the negative, and to consider why you might be receiving the negative feedback (similar to perspective taking!) Remember that if the feedback is merely 'venting,' (i.e. not constructive feedback that a manager can act on but merely sharing a complaint or ranting), either address the comment and sympathize with the employee, or focus on actionable and constructive comments.

## To Sum Up:

- Separate feelings and stories from actual feedback
- Practice perspective taking
  - Think about what you would say to someone who was receiving this feedback
  - Think about the feedback from the perspective of the person providing the feedback
- Adopt a growth mindset
- Read positive before negative and focus on actionable content

## Next Steps

- Once you review negative feedback, take some time to understand it before deciding what to do next.
  - "Where so many of us pressure ourselves to push past our emotions and respond right away, these highly self-aware people gave themselves days or even weeks to bounce back from difficult feedback before deciding what to do next," (Eurich, 2018, p. 3).
  - Take time to think and allow for emotional reaction to subside (Gregory, 2016).
- Feedback should be an ongoing discussion. Welcome it, and act on it once you've reviewed it.
  - "Those who engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their coworkers showed dramatic improvement, while the improvement of those who didn't 'barely exceeded random chance,'" (Eurich, 2018).
  - Ask for clarity, examples, and suggestions on next steps (Gregory, 2016).
- Give yourself a score on how well you handled the feedback.
  - This can motivate you to reflect on how well you solved issues raised (Stone & Heen, 2015).
- Sometimes the feedback cannot be approached by the manager alone – invite others to help solve organizational issues.
- Create a culture that accepts and values failure (Ilgen, & Davis, 2000).

# CONCLUSION

While reading negative feedback, remember to:

1. Read positive comments first
2. Focus on actionable feedback
3. Practice perspective taking
4. Adopt a growth mindset
5. Separate feelings and stories from actual feedback

Before deciding what to do about the feedback, take some time to let it sink in. Give yourself a score on how well you handled the feedback, and get other stakeholders involved when needed. In the future, maintain an open dialogue regarding feedback and create a culture where failure is accepted.

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