How to receive feedback

Some people can’t take a compliment. Some can’t take criticism. That’s too bad, because mastering the subtle art of handling whatever feedback comes your way is a crucial part of gaining your colleagues’ respect, improving on the job and enhancing your understanding of others. Fortunately, anyone can learn how to take feedback well. Just follow these steps for receiving both reinforcing (positive) and redirecting (negative) feedback.

Receiving reinforcing (positive) feedback

1. Listen.

Most people are all ears when they receive reinforcing feedback. But if that’s not true for you and praise makes you uncomfortable, try to give the person the courtesy of your undivided attention. It takes time and effort to observe and recognize others’ achievements and contributions, and feedback shouldn’t be ignored or shrugged off.

2. Smile and make eye contact.

Others enjoy knowing that they’re brightening your day. Plus, positive body language will encourage the person to give you more reinforcing feedback in the future.

3. Thank the person.

This step is crucial. If you’re the type to say, “It was nothing” or “I actually thought I blew it,” stop it. You’re not only undermining your own hard work and credibility with statements like that, but also making the other person feel bad for praising you. Conversely, if you’re the type to milk it (e.g., “Really? You thought so?”), restrain yourself and stick to a basic, heartfelt thank you.

4. If appropriate, ask for redirecting feedback as well.

Sometimes a piece of reinforcing feedback provides a great opportunity to obtain more information. Take it!
5. Document the feedback.

Keep a document or spreadsheet to track the feedback you receive (or if you often receive it via email, create a special folder). Look back on it when you need a lift, or to remind yourself of what you should continue doing. It will also come in handy if your company does annual performance reviews; you’ll already have specific feedback at your fingertips to show what a great job others think you’re doing.

6. Assess the feedback.

You need to decide if you want to act on the feedback or not. Sometimes you shouldn’t — it’s just one person’s opinion, after all. To find out, ask yourself: Did the feedback come from a trusted source? Did the person praise something that others also seem to like about your behavior or work? Does it strike you as on-target and genuine, or was the person just trying to butter you up or get you to do something else?

7. If appropriate, do more of what the person praised.

If you decide that the feedback is valid, you could choose to do more of what the person recognized.

Be particularly alert if the behavior you received feedback on was new or unusual for you. Ask yourself:

- What do I usually do instead?
- Is my typical approach or attitude something that I could try to phase out or change?
- Are there other times and ways that I can perform the behavior that was praised?

If you aren’t sure whether you should replace an old behavior with a new one, just ask. The person will probably be thrilled that you got the message.

“Rohit, thanks for the compliment. Would you prefer I use that approach in calls with other customers?”

Receiving redirecting (negative) feedback

1. Be compassionate toward the other person.
The person wouldn’t be telling you that she thinks you need to work on your public speaking skills, or that your clothing is inappropriate for the office, or that you need to stop dominating meetings, if it weren’t important for her or the company. Keep this in mind as you listen, and cut the person some slack if the feedback isn’t delivered perfectly.

2. **Approach the situation as an opportunity to learn.**

If you view the experience as a rare opportunity to find out how someone else perceives you and to improve yourself, it will be less painful and a lot more productive.

3. **Keep your body language upbeat.**

Your body language can convey your emotions as much — if not more than — your words. Be very conscious of keeping your physical response relaxed, open and encouraging. Smile. Make eye contact. Nod when appropriate. Even if you’re dying inside, it’s important to signal that you want to hear what the person has to say. Plus, remaining physically open can actually make you feel more open.

4. **Listen.**

This sounds a lot easier than it is. You might find yourself shutting down, or interrupting the other person to defend yourself. Work hard to stay engaged and hear the other person out. You owe others the professional courtesy of listening to the feedback that they have likely put time and effort into preparing for you.

5. **If needed, ask for time to process the feedback.**

It’s perfectly acceptable to take time to digest what you hear and reflect on your next move. If the feedback session gets particularly emotional or lengthy for you, you can even request a break right then and there (e.g., “This is a lot to process. Would you mind if I take a five-minute break and then return to hear the rest of your feedback?”).

Another option is to wait for the person to finish and then request time to think about the feedback. You can also schedule a follow-up meeting to discuss it further.

   “Thanks for the honest feedback, Nikki. This gives me a lot to think about. Would it be OK if I scheduled a follow-up meeting for tomorrow, which will give me some time to reflect on what we’ve talked about?”

6. **Acknowledge and thank the person.**
Acknowledging and agreeing are two different things. You're under no obligation to do the latter, but doing the former will show that you're a professional who's committed to hearing diverse opinions.

As for thanking the person, it might not be the first thing you feel like doing. Do it anyway. You'll be glad later that you took the high road. Plus, you really do owe someone who gives you feedback a thank you. It takes guts, as well as time and careful thought, to give redirecting feedback.

- “Thanks for being honest. I can see why you would have gotten that impression.”
- “I hadn’t thought about it that way before. Thanks for sharing your views.”
- “That’s worth considering. Thanks for letting me know.”

Experienced manager Rie Langdon describes what she did to ensure she didn’t just hear about the good stuff she was doing, but also received more difficult feedback and news.

7. Ask clarifying, non-confrontational, questions.

Ask questions based on your understanding of what you're hearing, versus your desire to explain yourself. And keep in mind that tone of voice is everything here: strive for curious and open, versus demanding and petulant.

**Poor:** “So you think my section of the report was weak, even though the client said she liked it?”

**Better:** “Which areas of the report did you find weakest? Some examples will help me better understand your perspective.”

8. Once the feedback session is over, take 24 hours to assess it.

Tough feedback stings, sometimes so much so that we lose all objectivity. Give yourself 24 hours to evaluate what you’ve heard.

Once you get some perspective, you might see that the person had a point. Or, it could be that the power dynamics and politics of the situation mean that you have to take action if you wish to keep your credibility intact — or, in serious cases, keep your job! Conversely, you might decide that the feedback was off-base or unfair, or that you have too many other priorities to deal with to add it to your development plan.

Whether you agree with the feedback or not, document it, preferably in one place. That way, you'll capture the details while they're fresh in your mind. Also, over time you'll be able to spot trends in the feedback that you receive.

10. If appropriate, create a plan for applying the feedback.

If the feedback seems valid and useful, think through how you can apply what you've learned. For example, let's say your manager tells you she thinks your presentation skills are weak. You could make a list of the actions required to remedy the problem, such as taking a public speaking class, always getting feedback on your PowerPoint slides before you run with them, and doing practice presentations for friends. What should you do first? What will be easy to fit into your schedule? What will have the biggest impact? Plan accordingly.

11. Follow through.

In some rare cases, accepting feedback isn't optional (e.g., you are harrassing someone at work and your manager tells you to stop). But in most situations, it's more nebulous.

Unless the feedback seems completely off-target, it's usually worth trying a different approach or behavior. Just see what happens. You might discover it suits you better than you expected — or that you were only resisting it because you wanted to be right, or were afraid of change. And if it doesn't work out, at least you will have attempted something new, and, in the process, broadened your understanding of how you work best.

12. Follow up.

Letting the person who gave you the feedback know that you're working on it will show you're motivated and responsive. You'll also signal you're open to feedback again in the future.

“Katie, I just wanted to let you know that I took your feedback seriously and am working on keeping my emails short and to-the-point. Please let me know if the emails I send this week are easier for you to deal with, or if you have other suggestions for how I can improve them. Thanks!”

Next: Common mistakes

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