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## **ARTICLE** **RECEIVING FEEDBACK**

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Actually Help You

*by Peter Bregman*

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

# How to Ask for Feedback That Will Actually Help You

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“So,” I asked Mary\*. “Do you have any feedback for me? What can I do better the next time?”

We had just finished delivering a leadership training to senior executives at a large financial services company. My working relationship with Mary was a little tricky; she was my co-trainer and also my client since she worked full time at the bank.

Mary did have some feedback for me, which was insightful and useful. After I thanked her, she asked me if I had any feedback for her.

I did. There were three things I thought she could do that would make her a more powerful, effective trainer. But I never got them out. As soon as I began to point out the first one, she interrupted me.

“You don’t understand,” she told me, and then explained all the reasons why she had acted the way she did. She was polite, but completely defensive. If she were my employee, or if I were coaching her, I would have pushed through her defensiveness. Maybe I should have anyway. But I made a quick judgment call that it wasn’t in my interests and wouldn’t, ultimately, help our working relationship. So I stopped.

A lot has been written about [how to give feedback](#) but not much about how to get useful feedback from others. It can be hard to draw out the truth from the people around you — people who may be too nice to share the full picture or too intimidated to be honest.

And yet it’s a gift to know what people are really thinking about you. This is true in all realms of your life — knowing how your partner or spouse feels can mean the difference between a connected relationship and a dysfunctional one.

Being good at receiving feedback is especially important at work, because your colleagues are less likely to push past your defensiveness and more willing to write you off if they have a hard time working with you. If that happens, you’ll never know why — since you won’t have heard the feedback — so you’ll keep repeating the same mistakes.

If you have a performance review coming up, it’s an especially good time to work on your ability to elicit useful feedback. Your annual review is a prime opportunity to gain clarity on how you are perceived and what opportunities may lie ahead.

Here’s how to increase your chances of hearing the truth:

1. **Be clear that you want honest feedback.** Let people know they’re doing you a favor by being truthful. “Don’t be nice,” you can tell them. “Be helpful.” Explain that you want to get the most out of the conversation, and it won’t work if they hold back.
2. **Focus on the future.** Ask what you can do better going forward as opposed to what you did wrong in the past. When you ask people what you can do to be more effective in the future, they tend to be more honest.
3. **Probe more deeply.** Don’t just ask once. Give people multiple opportunities to give you real feedback, to increase the chances they’ll feel comfortable doing so. It can be helpful to ask about specific situations — for example, what could you have done better in a particular meeting?

4. **Listen without judgment.** Try not to judge any feedback you receive, whether it's positive or negative. Thank people for being honest with you and let them know that you find their observations and opinions helpful. If they think that you really want the truth and you won't react poorly to negative feedback, they'll be more willing to be completely honest. If you get defensive about anything, they'll stop and be polite.
5. **Write down what they say.** This tactic accomplishes two things. A little silence communicates that you're taking feedback seriously and it gives those offering it time to think about what else they might say. Often they'll volunteer a second — and very important — thought while waiting for you to finish writing.

Getting useful feedback can be the fastest route to growth and improved performance. It's not always an accurate reflection of who you are — it often isn't. But it is always an accurate reflection of how you're perceived. And knowing how you're perceived is critically important if you want to increase your influence as a leader.

Not long after our awkward attempt to trade feedback, Mary left the financial services firm and joined a different company, which she left after a short time.

It may be hard to hear the truth, but, in the long run, it's even harder not to.

\*Not her real name

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