



Article

How to get others to give you the honest feedback you need

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How to get others to give you the honest feedback you need

Giving feedback is tough for both parties. Most people prefer not to cause others pain, so we tend either not to give them feedback at all, or to soften it. Feedback givers may also be concerned that the feedback receiver will react with aggression. Making it safe for other people to give you feedback is a key skill for anyone committed to their own performance improvement or personal development.

The following guidelines provide a framework for gathering increased levels of honest and useful feedback.

1. Be specific on what you want feedback on and why. Feedback on a few, relatively simple things is much easier to give than on lots of things or on vague behaviours. So “Please tell me whether my slide presentation had too little or too much information” is better than “What did you think about my presentation?”
2. Decide who you most want feedback from and keep the number small. People respond better, when they know you have specifically chosen them. Don’t just choose people you like; choose also people, whose opinion you respect, even though you may not get on well.
3. Tell them why you selected them, rather than someone else.
4. Prepare them for observing you and giving you feedback. Ideally, say: “I’m giving this presentation tomorrow and I’d appreciate your observations”. It’s always harder to give feedback on things you were not paying close attention to. (So, for example, they might normally attend to the content of the presentation, but not the manner of it.)
5. Thank them for their feedback. If it hurts, admit that you found it painful and acknowledge that it may have been difficult for them to be so honest.
6. Say what you are going to do with the feedback – for example, create a plan for simple things you can do to bring about the change you want.
7. Leave the door open for further, unprompted feedback on the issue you are working on. (“Can I ask you for similar feedback another time?”)

If you get unexpected feedback from someone, try to accept it in a similar, positive spirit, but be prepared to assert your own boundaries. For example: “I’d really value that feedback, but could we arrange to talk about it tomorrow, when I can give it my full attention? I don’t want to do it in a hurry.” Or: “I can see that this feedback would be useful, but right now I’m focusing on another priority for personal change and I don’t want to be distracted from that. Can we contract to have this conversation in a month or so, when I’m ready for it?” (Note the language – “can we contract?” keeps them involved, rather than dismissed.)

A simple way to increase your openness to feedback is to give it to yourself. Be your own best friend and try to imagine what they would say to you. Imagine it as a real, tough conversation. The more honest you can be with yourself, the easier it is to say to other people, who give you feedback, “Yes, that’s something I’m working on, so any help is much appreciated!”