

Feedback

Receiving Feedback as a Precious Gift

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Why settle for success when you can grow to significance?

Larry Cole, Ph.D.

Byrd Baggett, CSP

Lawson Magruder, LTG, US Army Retired

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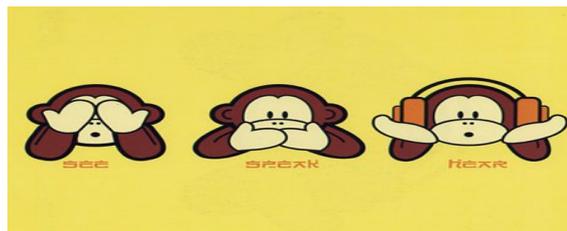
Don't tell me what I don't want to hear!

Just for a moment, imagine waking up after a good night's rest and some of your feedback systems were not working. You could see and hear, but you didn't recognize anything in the room. You are conscious. So you know that you should be awakening in your bedroom, but nothing seems familiar. You're also aware that you can't feel the sheets against your body. Your mind wanted to walk, but without feeling in your legs, you simply crumbled to the floor. Even if you could walk, you would have no idea where any rooms might be located within wherever you have found yourself.

Can you imagine the fear that might overwhelm you? We're so accustomed to receiving and understanding essential information from our environment, that we literally take feedback for granted. We think you will agree that the simple act of getting out of bed to make the morning coffee is both a gift and a blessing.

The feedback systems contained in our bodies protect us. Positive feedback tells us to start eating when we're hungry and when to stop. Painful feedback is similarly important. Just imagine if you could not feel the pain when touching something hot - you could experience severe physical damage without knowing it. That wouldn't be good.

We recognize the beauty of feedback in the physical realm, but struggle with it in the psychological realm. More specifically, receiving positive feedback is generally okay (some of us act embarrassed), but receiving information that is painful in some manner is a different story. Our nature is to protect ourselves from danger and other painful events, thus the reason many of us adhere to the Japanese proverb... "see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil".



The problem is — adhering to this proverb can derail your career. The following table presents the combination of being aware of your competencies. As you review this table, imagine for a moment that other people thought you to be incompetent and you were not aware of your incompetence – i.e., a blind spot. Not being aware of your incompetence is a train wreck waiting to happen. You want to be aware of both your competencies and incompetence. Remember, leaders know who they are.

	Competent	Not Competent
Aware	Aware Competent	Aware Not Competent
Not Aware	Not Aware Competent	Not Aware Not Competent

The objectives of this article are to help you to understand the significant role feedback plays in your life, and the importance to **seek it, understand it, and use it**. Consider the fact to get where you want to go, you must:

1. Use feedback to know your point of origin.
2. Know where you want to go.
3. Know how to get where you want to go.
4. Use feedback along your journey to ensure you get where you want to go.

As previously noted, without feedback we would not get where we want to go.

Learning to Accept Feedback

Warning! To use feedback more effectively, you may need to change. That is, you must accept the responsibility to do so and recognize the need to improve this skill set. The fact is, it is our responsibility to become the best version of ourselves (Kelly, 2004) since no one can do it for us. To do so requires the use of feedback. .

The next step is *recognizing the need to change or becoming more proficient at using feedback*. The importance of this step in a change process is obvious. (See Cole, Baggett, & Cole, 2009¹ to learn the 7-Step Change Process.) What is not as obvious is recognizing the need to change. To stimulate thought, we've listing disadvantages and advantages of *not wanting feedback in the workplace*. From our list, the obvious conclusion is to learn to *accept feedback as a precious gift*. Please feel free to add additional consequences to either list.

Not Wanting Feedback in the Workplace

Disadvantages

Not mature enough to accept the brutal truth.

Don't know if your supervisor likes your performance.

Could lose your job and not know why.

No chance to improve/correct your performance.

Leads to low morale—don't care about me or want to help me.

Perhaps I don't have the self-confidence or self-esteem to accept the truth.

I'm arrogant/narcissistic.

What am I afraid of? Not being accepted?
Being hurt? Recognized as incompetent?
I'm not perfect?

Advantages

Ignorance is bliss: Prevent learning painful news.

Protects the ego.

You can see there are more disadvantages than advantages. When the intensity of the disadvantages exceeds that of the advantages, then you experience the need to change. The disadvantages propel you to action.

Do you agree that an examination of the content of this table clearly shows a need to become a professional at receiving feedback? In spite of the overwhelming evidence of the importance of being such a leader, not everyone is. We'll call the person Jim. He's been a middle manager for several years. His supervisor realizes there is potential for Jim to be a more effective supervisor. The immediate challenge is the low morale and talent turnover in his department. Jim agreed to use a coach. That's when the challenges began. Jim wanted to focus on the problems within the team instead of what he was doing to contribute to the problems. Jim never accepted the fact that fish rot from the head down. The measured feedback about his performance from his team fell onto deaf ears. He would not accept the reputation that he had with his team. You get the picture. His unwillingness to accept the truth ultimately derailed his career.

Organizational Dilemmas

Several interesting dilemmas exist in most organizations in spite of recognizing the importance to provide performance feedback:

1. Employees don't receive any feedback!

2. Employees only receive feedback at their annual performance review.
3. Employees only receive feedback after making a mistake or when their supervisor is upset.
4. Supervisors proudly state they do not provide positive recognition for something employees receive payment to do.
5. A Gallup Poll reported that 65% of polled employees have not received recognition for a job well done in the last twelve months.
6. In spite of agreeing to the importance of using effective interpersonal skills, supervisors find it easier to provide feedback regarding their employees' technical performance than interpersonal performance.
7. Employees become argumentative upon receiving negative feedback and supervisors don't want to deal with a defensive ego.

Look Through Five Windows to Learn About You

Effective leaders know how to use the five windows through which they can look to learn about their performance. The first three are examining their thoughts, feelings, and actions. They continuously monitor and study their reactions to their thoughts as well as events that happen to them. For example, these leaders examine any defensive feelings by asking such questions as, "What is my body telling me?" or "Why am I reacting defensively to this situation?" These leaders understand that knowing is a requirement to manage themselves in order to maximize their effectiveness. In other words, you can't manage that which you don't know.

The fourth window is seeking information from others. Effective leaders continuously seek input from others. They want others to challenge their position and provide diverse opinions, because the ensuing discussion stimulates additional ideas leading to better decisions. Effective leaders want people to feel free to tell them anything!

Leaders seeking feedback from others often use targeted multi-rater assessments. A multi-rater assessment can consist of any configuration ranging from seeking input from a mentoring group consisting of individuals regardless of position to the popular 360° assessment. (Log onto www.teammax.net to learn more.) These leaders value the input by understanding it and putting that feedback to work.

The fifth window is self-assessments. A self-assessment is typically included when obtaining feedback from others through the multi-rater assessment environment. Additionally, there are many excellent self-assessments available to learn more about your leadership characteristics (contact us to learn more).

Selecting Your Option

You have three options when receiving feedback. *One* is openly denying it. Doing so sends the message of not being open to accept feedback which is the exact opposite message effective leaders want to send. A couple of words of caution are in order. You will have a strong temptation to deny, that which is not flattering even though you know that it is true. Also, the more intense your emotional reaction is when denying the feedback, the more you validate the content of the feedback to others. You are going to want to remain emotionally calm even in denial.

Two is listening, but not acting on it. That also sends a dangerous message.

Three is listening, understanding, and using it. Effective leaders understand the critical role feedback plays in helping them *to get where they want to go*.

You want to be the person other people will tell anything!

Accepting Feedback

You must learn to use two leader who uses feedback which refers to the “I” or “self” of gives you strength. It becomes a you lack self-confidence and, thus ensuing pain. On the other hand,



psychological systems to be a effectively. First is your ego, any person. It is an asset when it liability when it is so weak that avoid feedback because of the the ego can be so strong that it blinds you from the truth. Second is the pleasure-pain principle. You’re attracted to or seek pleasure and strive to avoid that which is uncomfortable. Both systems can protect you from “perceived harm”. In an effort to avoid pain, you can be tempted to adhere to the “*don’t tell me what I don’t want to hear*” principle, which prevents you from learning what you need to know. Instead, you want to learn the truth about yourself. You **MUST** become the person who **seeks, understands, and uses** feedback to improve performance.

Listed below are several suggestions to control your ego and override the pleasure-pain principle to help you become comfortable with **seeking, understanding, and using** feedback.

1. Controlling Your Ego

① **Humility.** If you haven’t already read *Egonomics* by David Marcum and Steven Smith then do so. As illustrated in the following figure, these authors place ego on a continuum with humility as the desired behavior.

2. **I'm brilliant, and I'm not.** These authors speak to the duality feature of being humble, e.g., you are as comfortable being a follower as you are a leader. Examples of other duality features are listed below:

Strength	Balance
Ambitious	Selfless
Certain	Open-minded
Competitive	Collaborative
Determined	Flexible
Direct	Diplomatic
Intense	Easy going
Motivated	Patient

3. **One more thing.** Through your competence, you recognize your incompetence. You are a work in progress. In the words of Mathew Kelly, author of the *The Rhythm of Life*, — “you are becoming the best version of yourself”.

② **Know your strengths and limitations.** Engage a serious improvement initiative to learn your strengths and limitations. You need to approach the information learned with the attitude that “*this could really be me and it is okay*”. After all, you are learning about you! Just recently, the Director of Safety received feedback that his tendency to change topics continuously during conversations (i.e., lack of focus) was adversely impacting his working relationships, thus performance within the company. His initial reaction was denial. He later agreed that he could *see* how such behaviors could interfere. Accepting the feedback salvaged his career with his employer.

You should be proud of your strengths and openly accept your weaknesses. You show *acceptance of you* by openly discussing your strengths and limitations with your people. You want to be certain that your people complement your weaker points.

Speaking of being human, you need to readily admit your mistakes. Actually, you want to use your mistakes, and those of others, as discussion points to improve performance. You know mistakes are inevitable; you might as well take advantage of them.

③ **Comfortable in your skin.** At the risk of being redundant, we list this topic to highlight its importance. You start by being humble and accepting your strengths and weaknesses.

You want to be proud of your strengths and accomplishments, but if you wrap your self-esteem around your position, title, or the initials behind your name, you're in trouble. Even if you have to “act as if” for a while, show people that you were a person before you were titled.

④ **Everyone is equally important.** Read the next sentence. Rmxmbr that xvxy lxxtx of thx alphabxt is xqually important to makx a sxntxncx xasily rxad. Like the letters of the alphabet, every person within your company is equally important regardless of position and title.

⑤ **Appreciate others.** Give credit to others for our successes, and accept responsibilities for mistakes made by our team members! Additionally, show appreciation of the talents of those around us by empowering and giving them the chance to do what they do best every day.

Empathizing is exhibiting appreciation through caring. Life can be difficult and showing your people that you understand their life situations sends a very powerful psychological message.

⑥ **Help others be successful.** You need to do whatever you can to help others be successful, even more successful than you. Remember, you receive that which you share with others. The more people you help to be successful, the more successful you become.

⑦ **Practice gentleness.** Here's an interesting suggestion. Show the more "kinder, softer, tender" aspects of your personality. In other words, you're putting the other people first.

2. Controlling Pain

Now that the ego is under control, let's turn attention to controlling the uncomfortableness (i.e., perhaps painful) when being the person to whom others can tell anything.

① **Interested.** Giving feedback is a sign of interest. So feedback from other's about your work shows an interest in you. That's a good thing. That's easy to understand when the feedback is positive or constructive. It is a tougher assignment to accept when the feedback hurts. You need to remember that thorns surround the beautiful roses. Actually, you frequently learn much needed information from negative feedback. The same is true when a disgruntled person provides it. Listen to these people and the information very carefully.

② **Objective.** Listening objectively with an open mind can be a challenging assignment, particularly when you feel strongly about the subject matter, the feedback hurts, or don't particularly like the provider of the information. Emotions can interfere with objectivity, but be objective and listen with an open mind anyway. The following suggestions will help minimize being a victim of our emotions.

A. Upon sensing your emotions beginning to rise, tell yourself to remain calm.

- B. Your body naturally becomes tense when encountering such situations and this tenseness fuels an emotional reaction. Assuming a more comfortable, relaxed and open position helps you to relax.
- C. Lower your voice and speak more slowly.
- D. Insert names into the conversation as much as you can while still speaking appropriately.
- E. Be smart. Listen to understand the opinions of others. It's possible their opinions can help you make a better decision or help more effectively sell your position.

The following procedure can also be extremely beneficial to remain objective and listen to understand.

③ Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

This cliché is not necessarily true, but you can minimize the pain through a very simple process.

- A. Thank the person for showing an interest.
- B. Paraphrase to demonstrate understanding and then find something that you can agree with even it is as simple as you've thought or heard that comment before. For example, *"Other people have also mentioned that I"*
- C. Ask the person providing the feedback what you can do to improve the situation.
- D. Paraphrase what you've heard, e.g., *"In other words, you're suggesting that if I do 'X' then 'Y' will happen?"*
- D. Close the conversation with another "thank you."

Remember, the person may say something that you need to know. The words may hurt, but if you look for the good, you'll find it.

④ Continuous Improvement. We've mentioned that mistakes = learning, and Marcus and Smith talk in terms of "one more thing". These authors suggest taking the extra step to demonstrate your seriousness about improving your performance; i.e., become a sponge to soak up learning. Be curious like a child to learn continuously. Seek the feedback we're discussing in this article. Obtain the services of a coach. Acquire the habit of reading; it's a great way to seek advice from others. Focus on improving yourself instead of comparing yourself to others. Remember, your intent is to *become the best version of yourself*.

⑤ **Different Opinions.** The final suggestion is perhaps the most obvious one. Develop the reputation of seeking and using the opinions of others. Adhere to the principle that diversity results in better decisions. Additionally, using the input offered by others shows them they are very important people. Doing so encourages them to be peak performers (Cole & Cole, 2010).

Practice, Practice, and Practice Some More

It should go without saying, that the more frequently you practice any behavior the faster you learn it. Susan Jeffers said it best with the title of her book, *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* for those circumstances when you find practicing the new behavior uncomfortable. As a leader, modeling *receiving feedback as a gift* to your people sets the right example. Remember, everyone is from the “show-me” state — Missouri (Cole, Baggett, & Cole, 2009²)

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Contact Information

Larry Cole, Ph.D.

Larry is the founder of TeamMax® Inc., a consulting firm that specializes in *helping people work with people*. He developed the TeamMax® “real-time” measurement methodologies to improve interpersonal effectiveness and improve teamwork efficiency that drives the company’s financial success. The TeamMax® methodologies systemically drive behavior change and measure the behaviors that were once thought to be too subjective to measure.

Since 1989, he has consulted to a variety of organizations, written articles and books, and has spoken to audiences about maximizing interpersonal performance.

Contact: 800-880-1728, lcole@cei.net, www.teammax.net

Byrd Baggett, CSP

Byrd Baggett is a best-selling author and popular motivational speaker. He has been helping organizations develop authentic leaders and passionately engaged teams since 1990. His corporate experience includes sales and management careers with two Fortune 500 companies.

Byrd is the author of 13 best-selling books that have sold in excess of one million copies. He is a Certified Speaking Professional (CSP) the highest earned designation presented by the National Speakers Association.

Contact: 251-716-3630, byrd@byrdbaggett.com, www.byrdbaggett.com

Lawson Magruder, **LTG, US Army Retired**

Lawson Magruder, Lieutenant General, US Army Retired, has been coaching professionals, mentoring leaders, and building highly effective professional teams for more than four decades. He led soldiers in combat in Vietnam and Somalia and commanded three large Army commands to include the historic 10th Mountain Division. Retiring with over 32 years of service, Lawson transitioned from the military into the corporate culture building enduring research partnerships in the homeland security arena, publicly sharing his leadership journey at seminars and conferences, and serving as a personal coach and mentor for business and military leaders nationwide. He is a member of the US Army Ranger Hall of Fame.

Contact: 210-364-3978, lwmag@gvtc.com , www.growingwinners.com