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Defensive Reactions to Negative Feedback

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone (Harvard Law School/Triad Consulting Group) say that in the corporate world, performance evaluations aren't working very well, especially when they contain critical feedback. They cite some recent survey results:

- Only 36 percent of managers complete appraisals thoroughly and on time.
- Fifty-five percent of employees said their most recent performance review was unfair or inaccurate.
- Twenty-five percent said they dread evaluations more than anything else in their working lives.
- Human resources leaders said their biggest challenge was managers' unwillingness to deliver negative feedback.
- There's relatively little helpful coaching and mentoring going on.

It's obvious that many managers need to get better at delivering criticism, say Heen and Stone: "But improving the skills of the feedback giver won't accomplish much if the receiver isn't able to absorb what is said. It is the receiver who controls whether feedback is let in or kept out, who has to make sense of what he or she is hearing, and who decides whether or not to change."

Heen and Stone believe feedback givers and receivers need to be in touch with the three ways criticism can activate psychological triggers.

- **Truth triggers:** The criticism seems untrue, off base, or unhelpful—making us feel wronged, indignant, exasperated.
- **Relationship triggers:** Something about this person makes it difficult to accept feedback that might be palatable coming from someone else. ("After all I've done for you, I get this petty criticism!")
- **Identity triggers:** The criticism attacks our core sense of who we are, causing us to feel defensive, off balance, perhaps overwhelmed.

These are natural reactions, say Heen and Stone: "The solution isn't to pretend you don't have them. It's to recognize what's happening and learn how to derive benefit from feedback, even when it sets off one or more of our triggers. Taking feedback well is a process of sorting and filtering." Once we've done that, we can figure out if the feedback is potentially helpful or genuinely worthless. Here are their suggestions:

- *Know your tendencies.* Over time, many of us establish patterns in the way we respond to criticism, for example:

MORE GOOD TEACHING IN MORE CLASSROOMS MORE OF THE TIME

- "This is plain wrong!"
- "You're doing this by *e-mail*?"
- "You of all people!"

Or:

- smiling on the outside but seething inside,
- getting teary,
- being filled with righteous indignation,
- rejecting feedback in the moment but considering it over time,
- accepting it right away but later deciding it's baloney,
- agreeing intellectually but having trouble changing your behavior.

If we are aware of our patterns, we can make better choices on how to process criticism—for example, "Usually after I sleep on it, I'm in a better place to figure out whether there's something I can learn."

- *Disentangle the what from the who.* "If the feedback is on target and the advice is wise, it shouldn't matter who delivers it," say Heen and Stone, "... but it does." We need to recognize when a relationship trigger has been activated, step back, and make an objective analysis of the validity of the criticism.

- *Hear the coaching side of criticism.* Most feedback has an evaluative component and a coaching component. We tend to be more attuned to the first, hearing it as an attack on how we've been doing things—even our professional competence (our identity trigger has been pulled). "Work to hear feedback as potentially valuable advice from a fresh perspective rather than as an indictment of how you've done things in the past," advise Heen and Douglas.

- *Unpack the feedback.* For example, a woman is told by a male colleague that she should "be more assertive." She might make a snap judgment and reject the suggestion ("I think I'm pretty assertive already") or acquiesce ("I really do need to step it up"), but what does this guy really mean?

- Does he think she should speak up more often?
- Should she speak with greater conviction?
- Should she smile less? More?
- Should she have the confidence to admit she doesn't know something?
- Or the confidence to pretend she does?

Before doing anything, it's important to find out what prompted the suggestion, what her colleague saw her do or fail to do, how he defines assertiveness, what he's worried about, and what he expects. In other words, they need to talk! Only then can she decide if the suggestion is worth acting on.

• *Ask for lots of mini-feedback.* “Feedback is less likely to set off your emotional triggers if you request it and direct it,” say Heen and Stone. “Soliciting constructive criticism communicates humility, respect, passion for excellence, and confidence, all in one go.” So don’t wait for the annual performance review; during the year request bite-size advice. And don’t ask global questions like “Do you have any feedback for me?” Rather, ask “What’s one thing you see me doing (or failing to do) that holds ~~me~~ back?” Bosses and colleagues are usually happy to respond, and specific coaching tidbits are often very helpful.

• *Engage in small experiments.* “When someone gives you advice, test it out,” suggest Heen and Stone. “If it works, great. If it doesn’t, tweak your approach, or decide to end the experiment.”

“Find the Coaching in Criticism: The Right Ways to Receive Feedback” by Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone in *Harvard Business Review*, January/February 2014 (Vol. 92, #1–2), summarized in Marshall Memo 518.
