Fear of Feedback

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If you're nervous about asking the boss how you're doing, you're not alone. Getting the guidance you need requires recognizing your fears, countering them with adaptive techniques, and gathering comments before your annual review.

Nobody likes performance reviews. Subordinates are terrified they'll hear nothing but criticism. Bosses, for their part, think their direct reports will respond to even the mildest criticism with stonewalling, anger, or tears. The result? Everyone keeps quiet and says as little as possible. That's unfortunate, because most people need help figuring out how they can improve their performance and advance their careers.

This fear of feedback doesn't come into play just during annual reviews. At least half the executives with whom we've worked *never* ask for feedback. Many expect the worst: heated arguments, impossible demands, or even threats of dismissal. So rather than seek feedback, people avoid the truth and instead continue to try to guess what their bosses think.

Fears and assumptions about feedback often manifest themselves in psychologically maladaptive behaviors such as procrastination, denial, brooding, jealousy, and self-sabotage. But there's hope. Those who learn to adapt to feedback can free themselves from old patterns. They can learn to acknowledge negative emotions, constructively reframe fear and criticism, develop realistic goals, create support systems, and reward themselves for achievements along the way.

We'll look closely at a four-step process for doing just that. But before we turn to that process, let's explore why so many people are afraid to hear how they're doing.

Fear Itself

Obviously, some managers have excellent relationships with their bosses. They receive feedback on a regular basis and act on it in ways that improve their performance as well as their prospects for promotion. Sadly, however, such

executives are in the minority. In most companies, feedback typically comes via cursory annual performance reviews, during which managers learn little beyond the amount of a forthcoming raise.

People avoid feedback because they hate being criticized, plain and simple. Psychologists have a lot of theories about why people are so sensitive to hearing about their own imperfections. One is that they associate feedback with the critical comments received in their younger years from parents and teachers. Whatever the cause of our discomfort, most of us have to train ourselves to seek feedback and listen carefully when we hear it. Absent that training, the very threat of critical feedback often leads us to practice destructive, maladaptive behaviors that negatively affect not only our work but the overall health of our organizations. The following are some examples of those behaviors.

Procrastination. We procrastinate – usually consciously – when we feel helpless about a situation and are anxious, embarrassed, or otherwise dissatisfied with it. Procrastination commonly contains an element of hostility or anger.

Consider how Joe, a highly accomplished computer scientist in a large technology company, responded to his frustration over not being promoted. (As with all the examples in this article, people's names have been changed.) Although everyone in the company respected his technical competence, he sensed something was wrong. Instead of seriously assessing his performance and asking for feedback, he became preoccupied with inessential details of his projects, played computer solitaire, and consistently failed to meet project deadlines. When Joe asked about his chances for advancement in his annual review, his boss singled out Joe's repeated failure to finish projects on time or to seek formal extensions when he knew work would be late. In fact, Joe's

continued procrastination became a serious performance issue that cost him a promotion.

Denial. We're in denial when we're unable or unwilling to face reality or fail to acknowledge the implications of our situations. Denial is most often an unconscious response.

Angela, a midlevel manager in a consulting firm, drifted into a state of denial when a hoped-for promotion never materialized. Her superiors told her that she hadn't performed as well as they'd expected. Specifically, they told her she'd requested too much time off to spend with her children, she hadn't sufficiently researched a certain industry, she hadn't met her yearly quota of bringing in ten new clients, and so on. Every time she tried to correct these problems, her male superiors put her off with a new series of excuses and challenges. The fact was, they had no intention of promoting her because they were deeply sexist. Accepting that fact would have required Angela to leave, but she chose instead to live in denial. Rather than recognize she was at a dead end, she did nothing about her situation and remained miserable in her job.

Brooding. Brooding is a powerful emotional response, taking the form of morbid preoccupation and a sense of foreboding. Faced with situations they feel they can't master, brooders lapse into passivity, paralysis, and isolation.

Adrian, a training manager, brooded when his boss set forth several stretch goals for him. Believing the goals to be unrealistic, Adrian concluded that he

couldn't meet them. Rather than talk with his boss about this, he became desperately unhappy and withdrew from his colleagues. They in turn saw his withdrawal as a snub and began to ignore him. The more they avoided him, the more he brooded. By the end of six months, Adrian's brooding created a self-fulfilling prophecy; because he had met none of his goals, his new projects were assigned to someone else, and his job was in jeopardy.

Jealousy. Comparing ourselves with others is a normal behavior, but it becomes maladaptive when it is based on suspicion, rivalry, envy, or possessiveness. Jealous people may overidealize others whom they perceive to be more talented, competent, and intelligent; in so doing, they debilitate themselves.

Leslie, a talented vice president of a public relations firm, fell into the jealousy trap when her boss noted during a meeting that one of her colleagues had prepared a truly excellent report for a client. Leslie began comparing herself with her colleague, listening carefully to the boss's remarks during meetings and noting his smiles and nods as he spoke. Feeling that she could never rise to her colleague's level, Leslie lost all enthusiasm for her work. Instead of seeking a reality check with her boss, she allowed the green-eyed monster to consume her; ultimately, she quit her job.

Self-Sabotage. Examples of self-sabotage, usually an unconscious behavior, are all too common. Even national leaders such as Bill Clinton and Trent Lott have hoisted themselves on their own petards.

Workplaces are full of people who unconsciously undercut themselves. Take, for example, the story of Nancy, a young associate who found herself unable to deal with more than two projects at once. During her review,

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Nancy resented her boss's feedback that she needed to improve her ability to multitask. But instead of initiating further discussion with him about the remark, she "accidentally" made a nasty comment about him one day within his earshot. As a result, he began looking for ways to get rid of her. When she was eventually fired, her innermost feelings of unworthiness were validated.

These and other maladaptive behaviors are part of a vicious cycle we have seen at play in too many organizations. Indeed, it's not uncommon for employees, faced with negative feedback, to rain private maledictions upon their supervisors. No wonder, then, that supervisors are reluctant to give feedback. But when employees' imagined and real fears go unchecked, the work environment becomes dysfunctional, if not downright poisonous.

Learning to Adapt

Adapting to feedback – which inevitably asks people to change, sometimes significantly – is critical for managers who find themselves in jobs, companies, and industries undergoing frequent transitions. Of course, adaptation is easier said than done, for resistance to change is endemic in human beings. But while most people feel they can't control the negative emotions that are aroused by change, this is not the case. It is possible – and necessary – to think positively about change. Using the following adaptive techniques, you can alter how you respond to feedback and to the changes it demands.

Recognize your emotions and responses. Understanding that you are experiencing fear ("I'm afraid my boss will fire me") and that you are exhibiting a maladaptive response to that fear ("I'll just stay out of his way and keep my mouth shut") are the critical initial steps toward adaptive change. They require ruthless self-honesty and a little detective work, both of which will go a long way toward helping you undo years of disguising your feelings. It's important to understand, too, that a particular maladaptive behavior does not necessarily tell you what emotion underlies

it: You may be procrastinating out of anger, frustration, sadness, or other feelings. But persevering in the detective work is important, for the payoff is high. Having named the emotion and response, you can then act – just as someone who fears flying chooses to board a plane anyway. With practice, it gradually becomes easier to respond differently, even though the fear, anger, or sadness may remain.

Maria, a midlevel manager with whom we worked, is a good example of someone who learned to name her emotions and act despite them. Maria was several months overdue on performance reviews for the three people who reported to her. When we suggested that she was procrastinating, we asked her how she felt when she thought about doing the reviews. After some reflection, she said she was extremely resentful that her boss had not yet completed her own performance evaluation; she recognized that her procrastination was an expression of her anger toward him. We helped her realize that she could act despite her anger. Accordingly, Maria completed the performance evaluations for her subordinates and, in so doing, felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Once she had completed the reviews, she noticed that her relationships with her three subordinates quickly improved, and her boss responded by finishing Maria's performance review.

We should note that Maria's procrastination was not an entrenched habit, so it was relatively easy to fix. Employees who start procrastinating in response to negative emotions early in their work lives won't change that habit quickly – but they can eventually.

Get support. Identifying your emotions is sometimes difficult, and feedback that requires change can leave you feeling inhibited and ashamed. For these reasons, it's critical to ask for help from trusted friends who will listen, encourage, and offer suggestions. Asking for support is often hard, because most corporate cultures expect managers to be self-reliant. Nevertheless, it's nearly impossible to make significant change

without such encouragement. Support can come in many forms, but it should begin with at least two people – including, say, a spouse, a minister or spiritual counselor, a former mentor, an old high school classmate – with whom you feel emotionally safe. Ideally, one of these people should have some business experience. It may also help to enlist the assistance of an outside consultant or executive coach.

Reframe the feedback. Another adaptive technique, reframing, allows you to reconstruct the feedback process to your advantage. Specifically, this involves putting the prospect of asking for or reacting to feedback in a positive light so that negative emotions and responses lose their grip.

Take the example of Gary, a junior sales manager for a large manufacturing company. Gary's boss told him that he wasn't sociable enough with customers and prospects. The criticism stung, and Gary could have responded with denial or brooding. Indeed, his first response was to interpret the feedback as shallow. Eventually, though, Gary was able to reframe what he'd heard, first by grudgingly acknowledging it. ("He's right, I'm not very sociable. I tested as an introvert on the Myers-Briggs, and I've always been uncomfortable with small talk.") Then Gary reframed the feedback. Instead of seeing it as painful, he recognized that he could use it to help his career. Avoiding possible maladaptive responses, he was able to ask himself several important questions: "How critical is sociability to my position? How much do I want to keep this job? How much am I willing to change to become more sociable?" In responding, Gary realized two things: that sociability was indeed critical to success in sales and that he wasn't willing to learn to be more sociable. He requested a transfer and moved to a new position where he became much more successful.

Break up the task. Yet another adaptive technique is to divide up the large task of dealing with feedback into manageable, measurable chunks, and set realistic time frames for each one. Al-

though more than two areas of behavior may need to be modified, it's our experience that most people can't change more than one or two at a time. Taking small steps and meeting discrete goals reduces your chances of being overwhelmed and makes change much more likely.

Jane, for example, received feedback indicating that the quality of her work was excellent but that her public presentations were boring. A quiet and reserved person, Jane could have felt overwhelmed by what she perceived as the subtext of this criticism: that she was a lousy public speaker and that she'd better transform herself from a wallflower into a writer and actress. Instead, she adapted by breaking down the challenge of "interesting presentations" into its constituent parts (solid and well-constructed content; a commanding delivery; an understanding of the audience; and so on). Then she undertook to teach herself to present more effectively by observing several effective speakers and taking an introductory course in public speaking.

It was important for Jane to start with the easiest task – in this case, observing good speakers. She noted their gestures, the organization of their speeches, their intonation, timing, use of humor, and so forth. Once she felt she understood what good speaking entailed, she was ready to take the introductory speaking course. These endeavors allowed her to improve her presentations. Though she didn't transform herself into a mesmerizing orator, she did learn to command the attention and respect of an audience.

Use incentives. Pat yourself on the back as you make adaptive changes. That may seem like unusual advice, given that feedback situations can rouse us to self-punishment and few of us are in the habit of congratulating ourselves. Nevertheless, nowhere is it written that the feedback process must be a wholly negative experience. Just as a salary raise or a bonus provides incentive to improve performance, rewarding yourself whenever you take an important step in the process will

Reframe Your Thinking

Almost everyone dreads performance reviews, which typically take place once a year. But how you respond to the boss's feedback – and how often you request it – will largely affect your performance and chances for career advancement. We've found that getting beyond that sense of dread involves recognizing and naming the emotions and behaviors that are preventing you from initiating feedback discussions. Once you determine those emotional and behavioral barriers, it's a matter of reframing your thoughts and moving toward more adaptive behavior. Below are some examples of how you might turn negative emotions into more positive, productive thoughts.

Possible Negative Emotion	Maladaptive Response	Reframing Statement
Anger (I'm mad at my boss because he won't talk to me directly.)	Acting out (stomping around, complaining, being irritable, yelling at subordinates or family)	It's up to me to get the feedback I need.
Anxiety (I don't know what will happen.)	Brooding (withdrawal, nail biting) Avoiding (I'm too busy to ask for feedback.)	Finding out can open up new opportunities for me.
Fear of confrontation (I don't want to do this.)	Denial, procrastination, self-sabotage (canceling meetings with boss)	Taking the initiative puts me in charge and gives me some power.
Fear of reprisal (If I speak up, will I get a pink slip?)	Denial (I don't need any feedback. I'm doing just fine.)	I really need to know honestly how I'm doing.
Hurt (Why did he say I wasn't trying hard enough?)	Irritability, jealousy of others (silence, plotting to get even)	I can still pay attention to what he said even though I feel hurt.
Defensiveness (I'm better than she says.)	Acting out by not supporting the boss (You can bet I'm not going to her stupid meeting.)	Being defensive keeps me from hearing what she has to say.
Sadness (I thought he liked me!)	Brooding, withdrawal (being quieter than usual, feeling demotivated)	How I'm doing in my job isn't about whether I'm liked.
Fear of change (How will I ever do all that he wants me to do?)	Denial (keep doing things the same way as before)	I *must* change to keep my job. I need to run the marathon one mile at a time.
Ambivalence (Should I stay or should I go?)	Procrastination, passivity (waiting for somebody else to solve the problem)	What really serves my interests best? Nobody is as interested in my well-being as I am. *I* need to take some action now.
Resignation (I have to leave!)	Resistance to change (It's just too hard to look for another job. It's not really so bad here.)	I'll be much happier working somewhere else.

help you to persevere in your efforts. The incentive should be commensurate with the achievement. For example, an appropriate reward for completing a self-assessment might be an uninterrupted afternoon watching ESPN or, for a meeting with the boss, a fine dinner out.

Getting the Feedback You Need

Once you've begun to adapt your responses and behavior, it's time to start seeking regular feedback from your boss rather than wait for the annual performance review to come around. The proactive feedback process we recommend consists of ==four manageable steps: self-assessment, external feedback, absorbing the feedback, and taking action toward change.== The story of Bob, a vice president of human resources, illustrates how one executive used the four-step process to take charge of his work life.

When we first met Bob, he had been on the job for three years and felt he was in a feedback vacuum. Once a year, toward the end of December, Harry – the gruff, evasive CEO to whom he reported – would call Bob in, tell him what a fine job he had been doing, announce his salary for the following year, and give him a small bonus. But this year, Bob had been dealing with thorny issues – including complaints from senior female executives about unfair compensation – and needed some real feedback. Bob wondered how Harry viewed his work. Were there aspects of Bob's performance that Harry wasn't happy with? Did Harry intend to retain Bob in his current position?

==**Self-Assessment.**== We encouraged Bob to begin by assessing his own performance. Self-assessment can be a tough assignment, particularly if one has never received useful feedback to begin with. The first task in self-assessment was for Bob to determine which elements of his job were most important. The second was to recall informal feedback he had received from coworkers, subordinates, and customers – not only words, but facial expressions, body language, and silences.

Bob took several weeks to do his self-assessment. Once we helped him realize that he was procrastinating with the assessment, he enlisted a support system – his wife and an old college buddy – who encouraged him to finish his tally of recollections. At the end of the process, he recognized that he had received a good deal of positive informal feedback from many of the people with whom he interacted. But he also realized that he was too eager to please and needed to be more assertive in expressing his opinions. We helped him reframe these uncomfortable insights so that he could see them as areas for potential growth.

External Feedback. The next phase of the proactive process – asking for feedback – is generally a two-part task: The first involves speaking to a few trusted colleagues to collect information that

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supports or revises your self-assessment. The second involves directly asking your boss for feedback. Gathering feedback from trusted colleagues shouldn't be confused with 360-degree feedback, which culls a wide variety of perspectives, including those from people who may not know you well. By speaking confidentially with people you genuinely trust, you can keep some of the fear associated with feedback at bay. ==Trusted colleagues can also help you identify your own emotional and possibly maladaptive responses to criticism,== which is particularly beneficial prior to your meeting with your superior. Additionally, feedback conversations with colleagues can often serve as a form of dress rehearsal for the real thing. Sometimes, colleagues point out areas that warrant immediate attention; when they do, it's wise to make those changes before meeting with the boss. On the other hand, if you think you

can't trust any of your colleagues, you should bypass such feedback conversations and move directly to setting up a meeting with your boss.

Bob asked for feedback from two trusted colleagues, Sheila and Paul, at meetings that he specifically scheduled for this purpose. He requested both positive and negative feedback and specific examples of areas in which he did well and in which he needed to improve. He listened intently to their comments, interrupting only for clarification. Both told him that he analyzed problems carefully and interacted well with employees. Yet Sheila noted that at particularly busy times of the year, Bob seemed to have difficulty setting his priorities, and Paul pointed out that Bob needed to be more assertive. Armed with his colleagues' feedback, Bob had a clearer notion of his strengths and

weaknesses. He realized that some of his difficulties in setting priorities were owing to unclear direction from Harry, and he made a note to raise the matter with him.

The next step in external feedback – the actual meeting with your boss – requires delicate handling, particularly since the request may come as a surprise to him or her. In setting up the meeting, it's important to assure your boss that criticisms and suggestions will be heard, appreciated, and positively acted on. It's vital, too, to set the agenda for the meeting, letting your superior know that you have three or four questions based on your self-assessment and feedback from others. During the meeting, ask for specific examples and suggestions for change while remaining physically and emotionally neutral about the feedback you hear. Watch carefully not only for specific content but also for body language and tone, since feedback

can be indirect as well as direct. When the meeting concludes, thank your boss and indicate that you will get back to her with a plan of action after you've had time to absorb what you've heard. ==Remember, too, that you can terminate the meeting if it becomes counterproductive== (for example, if your boss responds to any of your questions with anger).

During his feedback meeting with Harry, Bob inquired about his work priorities. Harry told him that the company's financial situation looked precarious and that Bob should focus on locating and implementing a less costly health benefit plan. Harry warned Bob that a new plan would surely anger some employees, and because of that, Bob needed to develop a tougher skin to withstand the inevitable criticisms.

As Bob learned, feedback meetings can provide more than just a performance assessment; they can also offer some other important and unexpected insights. Bob had been so immersed in HR issues that he had never noted that Harry had been otherwise preoccupied with the company's financial problems.

Absorbing the Feedback. Upon hearing critical feedback, you may well experience the negative emotions and maladaptive responses we described earlier. ==It's important to keep your re-== ==actions private until you can replace them with adaptive responses that lead to an appropriate plan of action.==

Bob, for example, realized he felt irritated and vaguely hurt at the suggestion that he needed to toughen up. He brooded for a while but then reframed these feelings by recognizing that the negative feedback was as much a commentary on Harry's preoccupations as it was on Bob's performance. Bob didn't use the reframing to negate Harry's feedback; he accepted that he needed to be more assertive and hard-nosed in dealing with employees' issues.

Taking Action. The last phase of the proactive feedback process involves coming to conclusions about, and acting on, the information you've received. Bob, for example, chose to focus on two action strategies: implementing a less costly health care plan – which included preparing himself to tolerate employee complaints – and quietly looking for new employment, since he now understood that the company's future was uncertain. Both of these decisions made Bob uncomfortable, for they evoked his fear of change. But having developed his adaptive responses, he no longer felt trapped by fear. In the months following, he implemented the new health benefits plan without taking his em-

ployees' criticisms personally. He also kept an eye on the company's financials and reconnected with his professional network in case it became clear the organization was starting to founder.

The Rewards of Adaptation

Organizations profit when executives seek feedback and are able to deal well with criticism. As executives begin to ask how they are doing relative to management's priorities, their work becomes better aligned with organizational goals. Moreover, ==as an increasing number of executives in an organization learn to ask for feedback, they begin to transform a feedback-averse environment into a more honest and open one, in turn improving performance throughout the organization.==

Equally important, using the adaptive techniques we've mentioned can have a positive effect on executives' private lives. When they free themselves from knee-jerk behaviors in response to emotions, they often find that relationships with family and friends improve. Indeed, they sometimes discover that rather than fear feedback, they look forward to leveraging it.