

HANDLING FEEDBACK

INTRODUCTION

- Handling feedback is an important technique for dealing with change. In fact,
"...feedback is the breakfast of champions. Those people who develop, learn and grow are constantly looking for feedback, they don't stick their heads in the sand.....The absolute best thing.....is to promote a culture where (employees) are given open, timely and constructive feedback"
Rob Akins as quoted by Human Capital, 2004

"...brutally honest conversations.....a lot of people are not comfortable giving negative feedback. But if it is done in the right way it helps people improve..."
Andrew Mohl as provided by Narelle Hooper, 2007c

- Organisations benefit when staff actively seek feedback and are able to deal with criticism
"...As executives begin to ask how they are doing relative to management's priorities, their work becomes better aligned with organisational goals. Moreover, as an increasing number of executives in an organisation 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 organisation..."
Jay M Jackman et al, 2003

Furthermore,

*"... - feedback on behaviour is an important stimulus for personal growth
- the most effective leaders are those who think of themselves as learners and who welcome opportunities to improve
- it requires special effort to get honest and wide feedback from others because most organisations are 'feedback-shy'..."*

Harry Onsmann, 2004d

- **Need to assume worthiness in all feedback.** On the other hand, most people dread and fear feedback, especially in the traditional form of work performance reviews. These reviews are usually done annually. Generally, staff fear that they will hear nothing but criticism; supervisors fear that any criticism will result in stonewalling, anger, and/or tears. As a result, **rather than seek feedback, people tend to avoid it and prefer to second guess**
- **But how you respond to feedback – and how often you request it – will largely affect your performance and chances for career advancement.**
- **Fear and assumptions** about feedback often manifest themselves in **psychologically mal-adaptive behaviours such as procrastination, denial, brooding, jealousy and self-sabotage**
 - **Procrastination**
Procrastination occurs when you feel **helpless and/or anxious and/or embarrassed, and/or dissatisfied**. Anger or hostility are commonly linked with procrastination
 - **Denial**
Denial occurs when you are **unable or unwilling to face reality or fail to acknowledge the implications of a situation**

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- Brooding

Brooding involves a form of **morbid preoccupation** and **sense of foreboding**. Faced with situations that they feel they cannot master, **brooders lapse into passivity, paralysis and isolation**

- Jealousy

Comparing ourselves with others is normal. It can become maladaptive when it is based on suspicion, rivalry, envy or possessiveness. They can debilitate themselves by over idealising others

- Self-sabotage

This condition normally involves people unconsciously undercutting themselves and raining private maledictions upon their bosses

LEARNING TO ADAPT

- There is a need

"...to acknowledge negative emotions, constructively reframe fear and criticism, develop realistic goals, create support systems and to reward themselves for achievement along the way..."

Jay M Jackman et al, 2003

- This involves thinking positively about change and overcoming the negative emotions and resistance associated with change
- Getting beyond that sense of dread involves recognising and naming the emotions and behaviours that are preventing you from initiating feedback discussions. Once you determine these emotional and behavioural barriers, it's a matter of reframing your thoughts and moving towards more adaptive behaviour. 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>(I'm mad at my boss because he/she won't talk to me directly.)</i>	Acting Out <i>(Stomping around, complaining, being irritable, yelling at subordinates or family.)</i>	It's up to me to get the feedback I need.
Anxiety <i>(I don't know what will happen.)</i>	Brooding <i>(Withdrawal, nail biting)</i> Avoiding <i>(I'm too busy to ask for feedback.)</i>	Finding out can open up new opportunities for me.
Fear of confrontation <i>(I don't want to do this)</i>	Denial, procrastination, self-sabotage. <i>(Cancelling meetings with boss)</i>	Taking the initiative puts me in charge and gives me some power.
Fear of reprisal <i>(If I speak up, will I get the pink slip?)</i>	Denial <i>(I don't need any feedback. I'm doing just fine.)</i>	I really need to know honestly how I'm doing.

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Possible Negative Emotion	Maladaptive Response	Reframing Statement
Hurt <i>(Why did he/she say I wasn't trying hard enough?)</i>	Irritability, jealousy of others <i>(Silence, plotting to get even)</i>	I can still pay attention to what he said, even though I feel hurt.
Defensiveness <i>(I'm better than he/she says.)</i>	Acting out by not supporting the boss <i>(You can bet I'm not going to his/her stupid meeting.)</i>	Being defensive keeps me from hearing what she has to say.
Sadness <i>(I thought he/she liked me!)</i>	Brooding, withdrawal <i>(Being quieter than usual, feeling demotivated)</i>	How I'm doing in my job isn't about whether I'm liked.
Fear of change <i>(How will I ever do all that he wants me to do?)</i>	Denial <i>(Keep doing things the same way as before)</i>	I <i>must</i> change to keep my job. I need to run the marathon one mile at a time.
Ambivalence <i>(Should I stay or should I go?)</i>	Procrastination, passivity <i>(Waiting for somebody else to solve the problem)</i>	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>(I have to leave!)</i>	Resistance to change <i>(It's just too hard to look for another job. It's not really so bad here.)</i>	I'll be much happier working somewhere else.

Some adaptive strategies

- **Recognise your emotions and response** - understand your responses, especially if maladaptive. This requires ruthless self-honesty and some detective work to undo years of disguising your feelings. For example, procrastination may be out of anger, frustration, sadness, etc.
- **Enlist support from someone with whom you feel emotionally safe** – perhaps a friend who will listen, encourage and offer constructive suggestions
- **Reframe the feedback** – reconstruct the feedback process to your advantage so that it is in a positive light so that negative emotions and responses lose their grip
- **Break-up the task** – divide the large task of dealing with feedback into manageable chunks with realistic timeframes for each one. Taking small steps and meeting discrete goals reduces your chance of being over-whelmed and makes change much more achievable
- **Use incentives** – reward yourself to help persevere with your efforts
- **Seek regular feedback** – do not wait for the annual performance appraisal “event”

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A proactive feedback process involves 4 steps:

- i) **self-assessment**, ie determine what parts of a job are important (prioritise), and then get informal feedback from co-workers, staff, customers, etc (understand the words they use plus facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and silences)
- ii) **external feedback**, ie use consultant, friends, partner, etc as well as your boss for clarification
- iii) **absorbing feedback**, ie privately review the findings from steps i and ii, and use it as a dress rehearsal for the "real thing"
- iv) **taking action towards change**, ie develop an action plan based on steps i, ii and iii

(sources: Jay M Jackman et al, 2003; Human Capital, 2004; Narelle Hooper, 2007c)

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