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Make Getting Feedback Less Stressful

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OVERVIEW

With workforce models evolving away from command-and-control models, the ability to influence and lead others has never been more critical. However, "soft" interpersonal skills are tough to get right. The most efficient way to improve as a communicator, influencer, and leader is by learning from the feedback others offer. Unfortunately, feedback conversations often are fraught with stress, which inhibits learning. As a result, feedback can be unhelpful or even counterproductive, particularly when it takes place in the typical stress-provoking context of a formal performance review.

There is a better model for giving and receiving feedback. It involves active management of emotions during feedback discussions to motivate and facilitate learning, and to mitigate the negative kind of stress that triggers snap judgments and closes minds. This better model works best in cultures where the casual exchange of feedback occurs frequently in the context of trusting relationships.

CONTEXT

Ed Batista shared insights into the emotional dynamics that underlie feedback discussions and the implications for optimizing the effectiveness of feedback.

KEY LEARNINGS

Emotion is a critical element in feedback—but can help or hinder the communication of important messages.

Emotions can be helpful or counterproductive in feedback exchanges. Emotions:

- **Are integral to reasoning (helpful).** Neuroscientist Antonio Demasio showed that emotion is essential for efficient decision making. During feedback conversations, we want recipients to care emotionally about the message in order to expend thought on it.

- **Attract our attention (helpful).** Victor Johnston called emotions "discriminant hedonic amplifiers." In other words, they boost signals in our cluttered mental landscape, showing us what to pay attention to. In this respect, emotions during feedback encounters are helpful, heightening attention.

- **Exert influence over thought (unhelpful).** Neuropathways that process emotions function twice as quickly as those that process cognition, found Joesph LeDoux. Speed has a price, however. Strong, feedback-triggered emotions can cause us to react with self-protective defensiveness or dismissiveness.

So, while emotional engagement promotes effective feedback because recipients invest attention and thought in the messages, strong and fast-moving emotions can undermine successful absorption of intended messages.

Feedback by its very nature is stressful because humans are primed to react emotionally—to respond quickly—to imminent threats. Decision speed is more essential than decision quality in threatening situations, when wrong decisions are often better than none. We perceive feedback as a social threat, and our bodies don't distinguish between physical and social threats.

David Rock identified five characteristics (the "SCARF model") of social threats that trigger the stress response, or sudden changes in physiology, emotional state, and cognition that optimize our bodies to react. Feedback situations may embody all five characteristics, involving a situation's perceived levels of: 1) **S**tatus; 2) **C**ertainty; 3) **A**utonomy; 4) **R**elatedness (among people); and 5) **F**airness.

That's why "Can I give you some feedback?" is stressful to hear and often triggers defensiveness. Defensiveness is a specific form of threat response, often generated by perceptions of unfairness. We feel misunderstood and want to explain ourselves. But like other stress responses, defensiveness impairs cognition, introducing bias, impeding decision making, and making it tough to collaborate.

Managing emotion is critical for effective feedback discussions.

Emotional arousal improves performance, but only up to a point (the Yerkes-Dodson Law). Some stress increases learning ("eustress"), found Hans Selye, but too much stress stifles it ("distress"). Thus, emotional management is critical in feedback situations, to avoid the tipping point into states of distress.
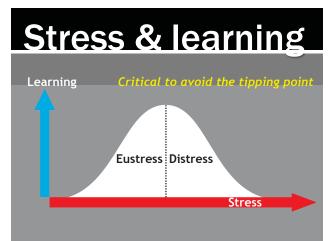
> "Six of the scariest words in the English language are: 'Can I give you some feedback?'"
>
> **– ED BATISTA**

Stress & learning

Learning

Critical to avoid the tipping point

Eustress : **Distress**

Stress

Figure 1
Feedback discussions are more effective when stress levels are managed

Managing emotions doesn't mean suppressing them. It means recognizing emotions as they are happening and employing techniques to rein them in, such as:

- **Reframing.** Researchers of how thought influences experience (James Gross, Rebecca Ray, Kevin Ochsner) call this reframing "cognitive reappraisal." It involves revising the meanings we assign to situations that trigger strong emotions, which often are unjustified snap judgments, and allowing that our initial interpretation might have been hasty.

- **Self-soothing.** This involves "physiological modification," or taking active steps to change our emotional state, and "response modification," or exercising active choice in how we express emotions. The steps include taking deeper, slower breaths, speaking more slowly and monitoring our tone, and sensing our nonverbal and body language.

- **Talking about feelings.** Research has found that talking about negative emotions diminishes them to a degree that simply thinking about them does not. However, how free an individual feels to share their feelings at work is heavily affected by "display rules," or norms circumscribing what kinds of emotions are appropriate to express.

A simple model can help dial back stress levels for more effective feedback exchanges.

Here is the model: Imagine a net, with the giver of feedback on one side, and the receiver on the other. The net represents the behavior that occurs; only behavior is known by both parties. The giver knows his or her own intentions, but those are hidden from the recipient unless expressed. The recipient knows his or her internal responses, but those are hidden from the giver unless expressed (Figure 2). Keep the conversation limited to the net area; i.e., observable behavior known by both parties. This discipline avoids suppositions that can lead to uncontrolled emotions. To discuss emotions, use this simple precise format that leaves no room for misinterpretation: "When you do x, I feel y."
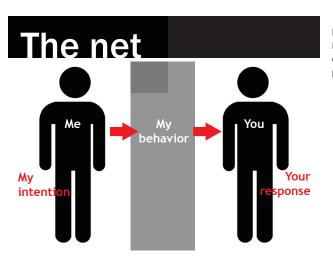

Figure 2
Don't cross the net! Keep feedback discussions to what's known by both parties

Because the sharing of emotions is critical to effective feedback, feedback is best given in person. If not possible, the second best venue is video conferencing or phone. Feedback by email is not advised, as email does not supply the emotional clues that allow receivers to make sense of the message.

Tips for Giving Feedback

When giving feedback, remember that it is easy to tip someone from eustress into distress. Your goal is to minimize the recipient's stress response.

- **Be mindful of the trappings of status.** If you have an intimidating office, hold the conversation on neutral ground.
- **Minimize uncertainty.** Don't spring a feedback discussion on someone; provide advance warning.
- **Maximize autonomy.** Allow the recipient a say in the time and place.
- **Build the relationship.** Successful, committed relationships average a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions. The positive interactions are like deposits in an emotional bank account that strengthen relations so they can weather disputes or criticisms without deteriorating. With this in mind, be generous with signs of appreciation (giving positive feedback frequently, not just during formal feedback sessions), and respond to small "bids" for attention that serve to strengthen interpersonal bonds (per John Gottman).
- **Begin the conversation by stating your intent.** Your intent should be authentic and positive.
- **Start soft.** Don't right jump in to critiques but build up to the messages slowly, emphasizing your mutual goals.
- **Manage stress levels.** If you see defensiveness, that's a useful marker of the stress response kicking in.

Tips for Getting Feedback

When getting feedback, remember to reframe, self-soothe, and share your feelings, all with the ultimate goal of managing the stress response. Some practical advice:

- **Reframing tips.** Remember that:
  — Feeling threatened doesn't mean there is an actual threat.
  — The act of giving feedback does not invest the other person with higher status.
  — You have choice and agency. If you're not ready to have the conversation yet, delay it.

> "Take active steps to modify internal emotional states and modify your responses."
>
> **– ED BATISTA**

- **Self-soothing tips:**
  - — Cultivate in-the-moment awareness.
  - — Recognize if you're perceiving the situation as threatening.
  - — Notice threat responses, such as defensiveness, and try to manage them.
  - — Slow down your responses to the situation.
- **Sharing feelings.** To the extent allowable in the culture, share your feelings in the moment. Feedback should be a dialogue.

Feedback success is highly culture dependent, so a feedback-rich culture is crucial.

Corporate cultures hugely affect how much social threat accompanies feedback discussions. Individuals can be quite skilled at reducing social threat, but their capabilities will be limited in the absence of a supportive, feedback-rich culture, where people are used to giving and receiving feedback and feel safe in doing so.

Analogous to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of individuals' needs is a hierarchy of needs for working groups, relationships, and organizations (Figure 3). The highest level is learning, self-awareness, and change—which effective feedback can catalyze. But before that highest need can be satisfied, a foundation of psychological safety, trust, and intimacy must be built.

Figure 3
Before teams can learn and change from feedback, they need psychological safety, trust, and intimacy

- **Safety means "I won't get hurt."** Therefore, people feel it's ok to be vulnerable, they're open to criticism, and they can discuss emotional topics without fear.
- **Trust means "I believe you and you believe me."** Therefore, people believe in each other's good intentions. They accept positive feedback as genuine and know that negative feedback is intended to help.

> "Individuals' skill at reducing social threat is like genes: the environment determines their expression. Our ability to deploy our skills is culture dependent."
>
> **—ED BATISTA**

- **Intimacy means "I can tell you how I feel about you."** When intimacy characterizes a team, others can be invited into feedback discussions, and ideally discussions can occur with the entire team at once.

Practical steps for building a feedback-rich culture include:

- **Invest in relationships.** Get to know each other, and build "emotional bank accounts."
- **Talk about emotions.** Expand your comfort zone, and modify the culture's emotional "display rules."
- **Make it ok to say "no" to feedback (or "not now").**

Points to Remember about Feedback:

- Feedback by its nature is stressful, both to give and to receive.
- Critiques should be delivered with skill, particularly emotional awareness, and expressed along with appreciation.
- Recipients should employ emotional management techniques that involve self-soothing and avoid the stress response that leads to snap judgments and defensiveness.
- Feedback should be built into cultures. It should be offered frequently within a context of trusting, committed team relationships.
- A feedback-rich culture will mitigate perceptions of social threat during discussions and allow feedback to hit its mark—promoting learning and catalyzing improvement.

BIOGRAPHIES

Ed Batista

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Ed Batista is an executive coach and an instructor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. He writes regularly on issues related to coaching and professional development at edbatista.com, he contributed to the *HBR Guide to Coaching Your Employees*, and is currently writing a book on self-coaching for HBR Press.

Angelia Herrin (Moderator)

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Angelia Herrin is the editor for special projects and research at HBR. Her journalism experience spans 25 years, primarily with Knight-Ridder newspapers and *USA TODAY*, where she was the Washington editor. She won the Knight Fellowship in Professional Journalism at Stanford University in 1990. She has taught journalism at the University of Maryland and Harvard University.

Prior to coming to HBR, Angelia was the vice president for content at womenConnect.com, a website focused on women business owners and executives.