

A conversation with
Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, authors of
THANKS FOR THE FEEDBACK:
The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback

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Q. What do you mean by “feedback”?

We mean it both narrowly and broadly. Feedback is that performance evaluation or those test results, but in a bigger sense, this is a book about how to learn about ourselves from people and experiences – how to learn from life.

Feedback can be direct (“you missed your sales targets”) or indirect (when your boss said “good work, team,” she looked at your two colleagues, but not at you). And we’re constantly getting feedback in our personal lives as well --that comment from your mother-in-law about your permissive parenting, the way your spouse left this morning without saying the usual, “love you.” It can be from your boss or your boyfriend, your neighbor or your niece, even from your suddenly-too-tight jeans. We get feedback from everywhere, and not only from the outside. Let’s not forget the ways we beat ourselves up – the feedback we get from ourselves, about ourselves, can be some of the hardest to take.

Q: For years, it has been argued that the most important thing about feedback is the way it’s *given*. In *Thanks for the Feedback*, you argue that the way one *receives* feedback is just as important.

We think that how we receive feedback is actually *more* important than how feedback is given. If your goal is to empty the sink by sending the water down the drain, which is more important: How you run the faucet? Or whether the drain is open? You can be the most skillful feedback giver on the planet, but at the end of the day, the receiver is in charge of what they let in, and how and whether they choose to change.

A skilled giver is great, but mostly our lives are populated by everyone else, folks who aren’t so skilled, have their own issues, or are too busy to really give

us the time we need. If you're going to take charge of your own learning you've got to get good at learning from these people too. A skillful and thoughtful receiver can draw value out of *any* feedback – even off-base, poorly timed, or poorly delivered feedback. That's why the receiver is the key player in the exchange. If you wait around for the best teachers and coaches to arrive in your life, you could be putting your progress on hold for a very long time.

In addition to the crucial benefits of learning and growth, there are two other huge benefits to getting better at receiving feedback. First, the way you handle feedback has an enormous impact on your relationships. If you're open to feedback at work, you send a message that you are a confident person who wants to improve. In personal relationships, receiving feedback requires us to be vulnerable, and letting others in to help us creates intimacy. Conversely, if we always keep feedback at bay, it's a disaster. Those around us need a way to discuss how our behavior is impacting them, and if we close off that outlet, a corrosive tension begins to eat away at the relationship from the inside.

To the more sensitive among us, there's another benefit: Getting better at receiving feedback reduces stress and anxiety. When we get tough feedback and are feeling off balance or devastated, learning is the last thing on our minds. We're just trying not to pass out. Improving how we manage feedback means improving how we deal with those times when we're flooded or panicked or just sick with shame or self-doubt. We may still get knocked over on occasion, but we can learn to regain perspective and get to our feet more quickly. And this resilience helps us approach feedback conversations with less trepidation and more openness.

Q: Why is feedback so hard to receive?

At the heart of receiving feedback is a clash of two core human needs. We're wired to enjoy learning and growing – it's a big part of what brings satisfaction and accomplishment to life, why video and app games are so addictive, and why people play golf with such dedication (the occasional great game only the more cherished for its unpredictable scarcity).

But human beings also need to feel accepted, respected, and safe -- just the way we are *now*. And that's why feedback is such a conundrum. We can point to times that we've learned and grown from feedback in our own past, so we know we need it, and we (theoretically) want it. But it can be enormously threatening as well because the very fact of “constructive” feedback suggests

that how we are now is not quite A-Okay. It can be brutally painful to see ourselves the way others do; that's true whether their perception is on target or terribly unfair.

So the goal of this book is to help people get better at receiving feedback at both the cognitive and emotional levels. We take humans beings as we really are, not the way a business or self-help guru might assume we are, or a boss or parent might wish us to be. It's not a book for how to receive feedback *if* you didn't have emotions, or *if* you didn't find everything so threatening, or *if* you would just learn to be happy or open-minded. It's how to receive feedback as the human being that you (we) actually are.

Q: How do you deal with feedback in your own lives differently as a result of writing this book?

There's an interesting question when writing a book like this – do you present yourself as the super-human expert who has come down to teach the mortals how to receive feedback, or are you one of those mortals, stuck in the same muck as everyone else, but armed with a few clarifying insights and tools? We are in it like everyone else and we hope this book resonates with people on a personal level. It's based on lots of research and observation, but at an emotional level, it's written from inside our own experiences.

Importantly, in the process of writing about and teaching this material, we ourselves have gotten better at dealing with our own toughest feedback challenges:

Doug: Feedback has always been fraught for me, and as a result, my tendency is to either reject feedback as “wrong,” or to get totally knocked over by just how right it is. The concepts in the book have helped me get much better on both ends of this. I'm better at understanding why the feedback makes sense, even if it's not 100% right, and I'm also better at keeping very stressful feedback in perspective. It's an on-going struggle, but I can get on top of it much more effectively now than I could before.

Sheila: I tend to hear negative feedback as a challenge: “You think I'm not doing this well? I'll show you!” And that was true whether I thought the feedback was “wrong,” or secretly feared maybe it was right. But in either case what I wasn't doing was actually engaging with the feedback and learning from it directly – about myself and about the person giving me the feedback. I was

skipping a bunch of crucial steps and I work to hit those marks consciously now. Difficult feedback is not just about motivation, it's about learning something about myself that maybe I didn't see before, or about the impact I can have on other people that I wasn't aware of.

Q: In *Thanks for the Feedback* you talk about identifying triggers that can affect how you receive criticism. What are those triggers?

We could all list a thousand reasons we don't take feedback, but it can be boiled down to three categories, three kinds of triggers that keep feedback out.

First, *truth triggers*. The feedback itself seems wrong or off target, based on incomplete information or poorly aligned with what we're trying to do. We don't take the feedback because it's unfair or lousy. Second, *relationship triggers*. Regardless of the feedback itself, there's something about our relationship with the person giving us the feedback that is throwing us off. The giver may be colossally ungrateful for your efforts, or not appreciating what we do well. Or maybe we just don't trust their expertise or their motives. Third, *identity triggers*. We feel too overwhelmed by the feedback to really engage in the conversation. It undermines how we see ourselves, or threatens our sense of safety or well-being. We can't learn because we can't think, and the feedback becomes distorted. Dealing with identity triggers means being able to see the feedback you get at "actual size."

In the book, we discuss the impact each trigger has on our ability to engage well with the feedback and the feedback giver, and offer ways to manage each trigger in a balanced and realistic way.

Q: Who is the ideal audience for *Thanks for the Feedback*?

When systems and business expert Peter Senge read *Difficult Conversations*, he said that the only people who shouldn't read the book are those who "never work with people, anywhere." We feel the same way about this new book, not because the book itself is so great (we hope it is), but because the topic is so universal. A natural audience for the book will be people in organizations – whether a business, a school, a hospital, a community board, or a government department. Executives, team leaders, HR professionals, and Learning officers may have a special interest in getting their colleagues to read the book.

But the book is written with family life equally in mind. We get at least as much feedback from family members, neighbors, and friends as we do at work, and that feedback can be even more useful – and more troubling. Some of the most interesting examples are drawn from daily life, and importantly, the framework, skills, and tools are the same whether you’re at home or at work.

Of course, we’d also like to reach coaches (whether of sports teams or executives); those in the entertainment industry (who get feedback constantly); therapists (whose patients may struggle with feedback, whose couples each have feedback for each other); and high school, college, and graduate students (who are either studying interpersonal relationships or are working to manage them more skillfully in their own lives).

We have friends in the dog show world, and it’s been incredibly interesting to talk with them about their own reactions to feedback, whether from contestants when they serve as judges, or their own dogs -- who respond to their training attempts well or poorly. Even the dog-owner relationship is a two-way feedback system. So, yes, the short answer is: everyone (possibly including dogs).

Q: Are there times where it’s better just to ignore feedback all together?

Yes. Relentless feedback can do real damage to your sense of self and sometimes you need to create boundaries. In chapter 10 we talk about when you may need boundaries, and offer three kinds of boundaries that can be helpful with people who persist in criticizing or “coaching” in ways that hurt rather than help.

We should also take this opportunity to clarify that getting better at receiving feedback doesn’t mean you have to *take* the feedback. Getting better means overcoming our tendency to do quick wrong-spotting to dismiss the feedback we get long enough to really dig into what the giver means, where the feedback is coming from, and where it is going – what they are suggesting you do instead. It may mean challenging yourself to find *something* right about the feedback. But the heart of receiving well is engagement -- whether you are curious and open, and at the same time able to stand up for how you see things and what you think is right. Once you’ve engaged well, you may decide not to take the feedback, that it’s unfair, not who you are, or simply not what you need right now.

Q: How have your careers working with businesses, governments, non-profits, and families influenced your research and opinions on feedback?

What we've learned are the ways that context does and doesn't matter. If I was going to teach you to juggle, I wouldn't care if you were at home or at work, in Athens, Georgia or Athens, Greece. It's similar with feedback. People are people at home and at work, and in every country around the globe...and feedback triggers will challenge you at home and at work and all around the globe. Of course, how we *engage* with the feedback will vary depending on where we are and who we're talking to, but the underlying dynamics – how we're making sense of things, what we're feeling – are the same. We might not have been as aware of that if we hadn't worked in so many different cultures, with clients ranging from global corporations and governments to parents and children.

Q: Do men and women receive feedback differently?

What's certainly true is that there are huge differences in how *individuals* receive feedback. Differences in wiring can vary as much as 3000% from person to person, in ways that make some of us relatively insensitive to even blunt, brutal feedback, and others highly sensitive, even when the feedback is indirect and mild. Some of us will swing wide emotionally – positive or negative – while others keep an even keel. And the amount of time it takes each of us to recover varies, whether that's bouncing back from upsetting information, or the amount of time we can sustain the positive boost of good news. Each of these variables differs among individual men and amongst women, and in our view these individual differences outweigh any patterns we've seen between “women” and “men” as a group.

Q. You talk about how receiving feedback is an art, or a skill that must be honed. How do science and psychology affect our ability to receive feedback?

Science and psychology are giving us fascinating insights into what's going on in our minds and bodies when we receive feedback – the chemicals being released, the thought patterns that commonly result -- and that awareness is a crucial first step in gaining some mastery over how we react.

Strong feelings are accompanied by chemicals that change how we process information, and can distort the feedback itself. It can produce something we call the “google bias” – where one isolated criticism (your colleague makes a crack about your inability to show up on time) triggers an assessment of your entire life. It’s like googling “Things that are wrong with me.” You get 1.2 million hits, with sponsored ads from your father or your ex. Suddenly it feels like you can’t do anything right.

Are you overreacting? Yes and no. You’ve triggered a search of your forty years on the planet, for all of the things you’ve screwed up or the disappointments you carry. You’re reacting reasonably to what you just googled. But it’s a distorted view of “you.” If you google “dictators” you’ll get 8.4 million hits, but that doesn’t mean there are 8.4 million dictators. And it doesn’t mean that your life isn’t also chock full of positive, satisfying, wonderful things you’ve accomplished and that people love about you. In bad moments, you *think* you are what you google. But you’re not.

Q. As much of our lives are now broadcasted on the internet, it seems that feedback is constant. Should online feedback be received differently?

Definitely. Feedback in three-dimensional human relationships in your real life has you in mind. Online feedback often does not. It’s easy for those who are “commenting” on your blog or your YouTube video to forget that there is a real person on the other end of their sarcasm and barbed remarks. Their purpose in commenting usually isn’t to help you or to improve a relationship; it’s to make themselves look smart, funny, or insightful, or to vent frustrations in their own lives. In that sense, online feedback often isn’t about you at all – you are just a catalyst for them to say something about themselves.

At the same time, it’s difficult not to be hurt when you are public misunderstood or viciously attacked. Do use the feedback think about whether there are ways you might have expressed yourself more clearly, anticipated the reaction, or want to do something differently in the future. But don’t spend too much time thinking about them and their issues. They certainly aren’t thinking about you.

Q. What are three quick tips for eliciting feedback that's likely to be helpful?

Great question. The research shows that people who seek out feedback – especially negative feedback that they can learn from – are perceived to be more competent, settle into new roles more quickly, and get higher performance reviews. So here are three tips that will help.

1. Don't ask: "Do you have any feedback for me?" Too broad. Too daunting. Instead ask: "What's one thing you see me doing – or failing to do – that's getting in my own way?" That lets people know you actually want the feedback, and gives them permission to be honest.

2. Don't just tap people you like and who like you – they can't help you with your edges because they don't see your edges. You live or work well and easily together. It's the people we struggle to get along with who are often in a position to offer us something valuable about ourselves. They see our edges because they are so wonderfully adept at provoking them. Asking them about one thing you're doing that's getting in the way will not only elicit valuable insight into what you can do to reduce the friction, it will also be a bold step toward improving that relationship.

3. When you're really struggling with feedback that seems fundamentally "off," divide a sheet of paper into two columns and make two lists. On the left, list all the things that are *wrong* with the feedback. What they are saying isn't true, it's unfair, they're one to talk, when they gave it was inappropriate, how they gave it was pathetically unskilled, why they gave it is suspect. Now on the right make a list of things that might be *right* about the feedback. Too often we use all that is wrong with the feedback we get to cancel out the possibility that there is *anything* right about it. Your feedback might be 99% wrong, but that 1% that's right might be just the insight you need. And once you get good at listening for what's right, not just what's wrong, you'll do that in your conversations themselves more easily – getting curious about what they mean that might be helpful. That's when you can really accelerate your own learning and improve your relationships.