

Leadership Success & Feedback: Turning “Negative Feedback” into Opportunity (Part 4)

“No Negative Feedback, Please”

“We Don’t Need Customers Telling Us How to Run Our Business.”

“Telling Everyone Will Just Make Things Worse”

“Whatever Happens It’s Not My Fault”

“Delusions of a Dream Company, How Executives Avoid Facing Reality”¹

“There is no such thing as ‘negative feedback.’”

That was what a CEO of a global company once told me. When asked to explain, he responded, “Feedback is neither positive or negative. It is how you receive feedback that will determine whether it is going to be positive or negative.”

“Hence every ‘negative feedback’ can be an opportunity for growth!” he added. How wise!

Why is it important for chief executives to receive feedback well?

Even highly effective executives with great strengths need to be really open to feedback.

Hence, it is important to be open to feedback. How should we respond positively to feedback, even negative ones?

1. Calm and Composed

When negative feedback is given, there is a tendency for us to overreact, become defensive, lose our cool, ignore the facts and decimate our ‘opponent’.

Unfortunately, this will not only blind us from some elements of truth that may be found in the feedback but it will also send an unequivocal message, “Don’t ever give me such feedback again!”

Worse still, this grapevine will spread like wild fire within the organization – Others will quickly know about our non-receptiveness to negative feedback and soon, no one will give such feedback anymore.

Failures will be covered up. This will result in poor decisions, self-justification-blame culture, gross inefficiency, certain ineffectiveness and may result in the demise of the organization.

This will create a climate of fear and intimidation, which will be destructive to feedback. Nobody will dare tell us even when we are heading in the wrong direction and may end up falling off the precipice of self-destruction.

Staying calm is an art. We need to assume positive intention and stay focused on the feedback rather than taking it personally. I find that in Asia, this is difficult to do. We tend to take negative feedback personally, as an affront to our over-inflated ego.

One good way to respond is to thank the person for the negative feedback and listen attentively to their explanation. This will help the individual open up and provide you with more evidence for that feedback.

2. Check and Confirm

Next, we need to evaluate the feedback. After we have paraphrased or summarized to ensure that we have understood their feedback accurately, affirm points of agreement and present points of disagreement and our evidence for doing so.

It is important to respond rationally to the feedback. If there are still areas of disagreement or if we are uncertain about the evidence, check the sources – theirs and ours.

Another useful step to take is to seek feedback from other parties to either confirm or refute the feedback. In this instance, don't just speak to friends or supporters. Even if we do, ask them to give us their candid and honest assessment. Get another set of opinions from different parties to assess the extent of the problem and issue. We might be shocked at how widespread the negative feelings may have become.

It is important to communicate the findings and actions taken to the parties involved after the results have been found. Sometimes, we may have to agree to disagree.

We need also to communicate our points of disagreement and the rationale for our decisions. Any self-respecting persons will appreciate this approach.

As leaders, we do not always agree with every feedback. It is important that we educate our team that although feedback is welcomed, not every feedback is useful. Ultimately, we have to make the call, back up any decision by our reasons, stand to be corrected, and face the consequences. Most of all, we should learn from the experience.

3. Concur and Correct

If the feedback is correct, we should be gracious enough to admit our mistakes, apologize if need be, thank the feedback provider, and then make corrections. The last action is extremely important. Some people are open to feedback but never change.

This will only negate the feedback loop and exacerbate the problem. People will become even more frustrated: "They ask for feedback but never change." Failure to change in response to feedback will breed a spirit of cynicism in the organization.

If there is delay in the implementation, it is incumbent on us to communicate the reasons for the delay so that people will know why. Too often, we are negligent in our communication.

When we apply these principles, 'negative feedback' will become opportunities for growth. We will be able to maintain a healthy balance on our strengths, keep our egos intact, and most of all, prevent us from being derailed as chief executives.

We will then appreciate and affirm the wisdom that “There is no such thing as negative feedback.”

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Learn the art of ***How to Communicate “Bad News” Effectively.***

Leadership Success and Feedback. As leaders, how open are we to feedback? Read this to find out how successful leaders receive and deal with feedback

¹ Finkelstein, S. 2003. Why Smart Executives Fail. Penguin Group. New York, USA.