

How to Get Feedback When No One Is Volunteering It

by Karie Willyerd and Barbara Mistick

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You are probably not getting the feedback you want or need, according to our research conducted with SuccessFactors and Oxford Economics. Less than half of respondents in our 27 country survey say that their manager delivers well on providing feedback either formally during their performance reviews (49%) or informally on a regular basis (43%). It gets worse.

The higher you go in an organization and the more successful you become, the less likely it is that people will voluntarily offer you feedback. You will receive less of it in general, and it may be so diffused that it's unrecognizable or unhelpful. As a result, the

search for genuine feedback becomes more and more your own responsibility over the course of a career.

If you can't rely on your manager to hand you feedback prettily packaged and perfectly delivered, it's on you to get what you need. The good news is that useful feedback is available. Sometimes you just need to work to get it from your manager, peers, customers, suppliers, mentors or others you admire. Let's look at an example.

Mark was a brilliant strategist, ready with a quick response to almost any question. After graduation from business school, he had worked for one of the world's leading management consulting firms before taking a strategy role inside a technology services company. His office lights were often the last turned off at night as he pored over data and reports, seeking trends that might affect the company's plans.

Eager to make an impression and succeed in his first corporate role, Mark worked hard and received lots of positive feedback from executives. It was loud and clear: *"Brilliant insight."* *"Incredible work."* *"Superb analysis."*

The accolades boosted his confidence and he doubled-down on providing more of the same. However, Mark's colleagues didn't seem to be as enthusiastic about his ideas and he suspected that they might not rate his performance quite so highly. He was right, there was some less explicit negative feedback in circulation as well: *"Doesn't value the opinions of others."* *"Fails to collaborate."* *"Doesn't listen well."*

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This feedback was hidden in informal channels. How could Mark get at the information he needed to address his weaknesses and achieve his career goals? Here are two tips for mining feedback that might require a little elbow grease.

Use more of the feedback you're already getting. If he'd been more open or aware, Mark might have seen the warning signs of these negative perceptions in hiding. During one of his presentations, for instance, he found himself defending his position to the point of near argument. His colleagues scattered from the room as soon as the meeting ended, but he never followed up to explore what went wrong. Effectively, he had shut down a feedback opportunity.

People may be dissatisfied with the amount of feedback they're receiving from their managers, but the first step to getting the feedback you need is actually to look inward. Mark wasn't truly open to hearing criticism from his colleagues.

When we get critical feedback, we find it difficult to accept and then change accordingly. Columbia University neuroscientist Kevin Ochsner has found that people only apply the feedback they are given 30% of the time. What happens to the other 70%? Perhaps people ignore it because it doesn't fit their self-image or they discount the giver's view. Or, if they are deeply affected by criticism, they may fail to register negative feedback as a form of self-protection. When someone tells us they are going to give us feedback, we tend to feel threatened – it's “the cortisol equivalent of hearing footsteps in the dark.”

When delivering feedback, take a lesson from the medical field. Researchers have learned that because of this agitated mental state and other causes, somewhere between 40-80% of medical information given to patients is forgotten *immediately* and half of what is remembered is incorrect. To improve the likelihood that patients will remember and apply critical information, researchers advise three actions:

- Give specific, detailed instructions, avoiding general guidance
- Place the content in categories, not lists
- Support instructions with written or visual materials

Managers can easily use these techniques to help make feedback easier to absorb, especially during performance discussions.

On the receiving end, you can counteract the natural tendency to disregard or reject criticism by accepting it enthusiastically whenever it's offered. (Like Mark, you should also be on the lookout for opportunities to seek feedback *before* it's offered.) Take notes and listen. After the session, see if you can summarize the feedback and divide it into categories to help with retention. Send a note back to the person thanking them and asking them to confirm the accuracy of what you heard. *"Does that cover the key points we discussed? Did I miss anything important?"* The mere act of taking notes and following up will help you access more of the feedback at your disposal. It also sends a clear message that you are open to receiving more. By categorizing and summarizing feedback, you can better manage it and identify the nuggets that are most critical to your development.

Ask for a perfect person comparison. Although everyone struggles with receiving negative feedback (or maybe because we do), it is equally difficult for people to deliver it. To increase the odds of getting the tough feedback you need, one of the most important things you can do is to make the person giving the feedback feel comfortable by showing that you are ready to hear what they have to say. One way of doing this is to actively seek out feedback.

Here's how Mark handled this in real life. Sensing that he wasn't fitting in, he talked to a colleague who also had a tendency to work late and seemed well respected in the company. The simple question he asked was, "If the perfect person was doing this job perfectly, what do you suppose they'd be doing differently than I am doing now?"

Note how this question takes the focus away from Mark, allowing his colleague to offer his opinions and suggestions without getting personal. The feedback started out in a general fashion, but Mark showed genuine interest and asked follow-up questions. Eventually his colleague got to the heart of the problem: "In this culture," he said, "getting buy-in on your ideas is more important than the idea itself. I think the perfect person would spend more time socializing ideas with others before making a final pitch. That would also show a commitment to collaboration."

This was exactly what Mark needed to hear: get out and spend time with others gaining buy-in to demonstrate a willingness to collaborate. He could do something with that feedback and he did, to great success.

Like mining for surface diamonds in a public park, feedback is often waiting for us if we're willing to put in a little effort. Taking a more disciplined approach to documenting and organizing the feedback you receive will increase the likelihood of acting on it. And if you're struggling to extract feedback that's hiding in the shadows, a few simple questions about how the perfect person would handle things differently can help reveal the truth. For better or worse, getting the feedback we need is ultimately our own responsibility. Smart managers don't wait for it to fall in their laps — they start digging.

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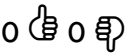
3 COMMENTS

Rajdeep Nair a month ago

I agree that we have to dig to get the criticism, and I like the perfect person approach. My question though would be about discussing the feedback. For example, in my last organisation, I was told that the office was flexible with work timings and expected me to work even on weekends. Still I was told that the time I come to work is not appreciated. I worked on weekends to meet deadlines, sometimes even late nights. My fault was I never voiced my opinion on it. Was it my duty to voice my opinion, or was it the management's fault that portrayed a wrong picture?

I heard that something somebody did was not upto the mark, I realised that job was entrusted to me so I wrote a mail to my team lead asking him for a feedback on the work. I never got a reply and later he complained about me to his manager. Should I have kept the higher authority in loop?

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