

ASKING FOR FEEDBACK WORKSHEET

A CULTURE OF FEEDBACK
STARTS WITH ASKING FOR
CRITICISM, NOT GIVING IT

ASKING FOR FEEDBACK

Why ask for feedback?

“If you don’t know what you need to be working on as a leader, do you know who knows?...Everybody else.”

- Sheila Heen, author of *Difficult Conversations* and *Thanks For The Feedback*

Other people have the information you need to improve your performance.

It is really hard to see ourselves accurately. Everyone has blind spots, biases, and things we simply don’t yet know that we don’t know. And while we judge ourselves on our intentions, others judge us on our actions, and the only way to really know how our actions impact others is to ask. That asking has a big impact on our performance. Those who seek out negative feedback have greater work satisfaction, adapt quicker into new roles, and get higher performance reviews¹.

As a leader, asking for feedback, advice and input is also a great way of role modeling humility and your own fallibility. Doing this improves psychological safety², which has been proven to be the number one contributor to high-performing teams³. Of course we should develop the skill of giving great feedback to support team performance⁴ but getting good at asking for, and receiving it, is going to have a way bigger impact on team performance.

When to ask for feedback?

It's always a good time to ask for feedback. About to take on something new, hard, or amazing? In the middle of something? Just failed, succeeded, or took a risk? These are all good times!

¹ Heen, Sheila (2015). How to use others' feedback to learn and grow
TEDxAmoskeagMillyardWomen https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQNbaKkYk_Q

² Edmondson, Amy C. (2018). The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth

³ Duhigg, Charles (2016). What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>

⁴ Kim Scott's 2017 book, *Radical Candor*, is a great resource for how to give great feedback.

As Kim Scott⁵ says, too often we think of feedback like a root canal – a long, painful conversation. When actually we should treat feedback like brushing our teeth – quick chats that we have all the time because that regular maintenance is vital to avoid the need for the root canal. It doesn't have to be a super formal performance review. Make asking for feedback a normal part of how you interact with those around you.

Whom to ask for feedback?

Your goal should be to get regular and frequent feedback in one form or another from everyone who engages with you and your work: customers, peers, your boss, your employees, those you directly manage, partners, vendors, regulators, and any other stakeholders. Very few of us are getting as much feedback as we need to maximize our learning so anyone who sees you in action and has a stake in your performance is worth asking. Again, think of it like brushing your teeth, this doesn't have to be a big ask. You are simply seeking out information on what they think of you and your work, and asking for advice, guidance or insights on how you could improve.

How to ask to get candid and useful feedback?

People's natural inclination is to lie when you ask them for critical feedback.

They want to figure out the answer you're looking for and give you that answer so they can leave the conversation as soon as possible. People don't lie to be malicious. They lie to spare your feelings; fear you might retaliate and hurt their career; sense the culture doesn't support airing concerns and frustrations; and/or don't know how to communicate their feedback effectively⁶. So, if your evaluation of them determines their bonus, promotion or raise; if they care about you and how you'll take the feedback; if they don't have the skill to deliver it well; and/or haven't seen you rewarding others for delivering critical feedback, then **it doesn't matter how genuine your ask is; your employees are likely going to sugar coat, offer vague comments, withhold critical truths, or straight up lie to you.**

Here are five rules for getting people to be more honest with their feedback:

1. **Get clear on what you'd most like to learn about and improve upon.** The more specific your ask is, the richer their answers will be. Know that the truth is

⁵ <https://twitter.com/kimballscott/status/1194993613991763969>

⁶ <https://theundercoverrecruiter.com/giving-the-manager-feedback/>

going to hurt, but it is that discomfort that will lead to learning. You have to believe that the short-term pain you are about to experience will be worth the long-term growth.

2. **Assure them that you are interested in the truth.** You have to convince people that you want them to tell you the truth. They likely won't believe you at first. You have to explain to them why you aren't there to be reassured but that you are looking for feedback that's going to be surprising, learning-rich and even a little painful. You have to convince them that this is your success metric rather than protecting your ego and just hearing positive feedback.
3. **Distance yourself from what you're trying to get feedback about if possible.** The more it sounds like you're trying to get feedback on something you created or you take pride and ownership in, the more they will try to say something positive. Instead, you should try to explain that you aren't the person who created it and that instead, your job is to create improvements.
4. **Frame your ask as a request for advice.** Asking for feedback makes people think about your past performance, while advice invites them to think about how to improve your future performance and so tends to result in more critical and actionable input⁷.
5. **Ask open-ended questions.** For example,
 - “What’s one thing you see me doing – or failing to do – where I’m getting in my own way?”
 - “What’s one thing I can do, or stop doing, that would make a difference to our work?”



Open-ended questions start with less direct language:

- “What...”
- “How...”
- “Tell me about a time when...”
- “Describe...”



Leading questions broadcast the answer you want to hear:

- “Will you...?”
- “Do you agree that...?”
- “Didn’t you hate it when...?”
- “Wouldn’t you...?”

⁷ <https://hbr.org/2019/09/why-asking-for-advice-is-more-effective-than-asking-for-feedback>

Don't use "would you...?" in a question. People are terrible at predicting what they actually would do, so they just make up whatever feels good at the time. Any questions like "Would you use this?" or "How would you do it?" should be replaced by questions that ask about actual present or past actions like, "What do you use?" and "How did you do it?"

How to respond when someone gives you feedback

1. **Do not defend or explain yourself!** You're not trying to convince them of anything so just listen with the intent to understand and learn, paying extra attention to anything surprising or uncomfortable.
2. **Yes, it hurts. Take a deep breath, put on your big kid pants, and ask the follow-up question** (especially if you're a bit scared to find out the answer). Learning the important stuff is rarely pain-free. That discomfort likely means you're on to something and it's worth exploring further. If you don't agree with something, ask them to tell you more until you can see it from their perspective. And of course, ask clarifying questions if necessary, but be wary of defensiveness creeping in. Clarifying questions should sound like "I'm not sure I understand that part. Can you say more about it?" not "Did you see me later on when I addressed all those concerns?"
3. **Don't be all business.** The more conversational you can be, the more they will share. If they say something interesting, try to offer similar things you've heard from other feedback to let them know they are not alone. Don't make it feel like an interrogation.
4. **At the end, try to restate your key takeaways and see if they have anything else to add or clarify.** Don't shy away from telling them how you plan to act on their input and how they can hold you accountable.
5. **Genuinely thank them.** You don't have to like it, or even agree with it. But it is always a gift to know what people truly think about you, and an especially generous gift when they are willing to offer advice for how you might improve.

How to use feedback to improve my performance?

1. Write down the key points from your conversation as soon as you leave.

Certain things they tell you won't instantly appear to be significant but gain importance once you hear others mention something similar. Plus, once you conduct a few interviews, they will likely start to blend together in your mind. Try to write down as much as you can so that you can always go back and see what they had to say.

2. Don't dismiss feedback too soon. Even with the best intentions, our defensive instincts are going to want to find fault with the criticism we hear, because it's easier to dismiss it than to deal with it. The three most common ways we convince ourselves not to accept feedback are⁸:

- “What they said was just wrong.”
Okay some of it might be inaccurate, maybe even most of it. That doesn't mean you should write all of it off. After all, the bit that is true might be just what you need to learn and grow. Also, it is really hard to see ourselves accurately. So, before you write off any of it, be sure to get another opinion – you might have just uncovered a blind spot.
- “That person is just biased.” Or “Who are you to pass that judgment on me?”
Writing off feedback because of who delivered it, rather than the actual content, is obviously flawed. Maybe the person is biased, or otherwise lacks credibility, but their insight may still be useful. Try to imagine someone you deeply trust and admire gave you that same feedback, what do you think they're trying to help you see and learn?
- “*That is not actually who I am.*”
When feedback directly conflicts with the story we tell ourselves about who we are, it's very hard to accept. Cognitive dissonance kicks in and we find a way to rationalize or otherwise avoid the information so our sense of identity can stay consistent and we don't have to admit we didn't live up to our own values or expectations for ourselves. This over-sized judgment of ourselves is the real problem. So the trick here is to shrink the feedback so we can see it as it actually is – a possible indication of where we might improve – not the

⁸Heen, Sheila (2015). How to use others' feedback to learn and grow
TEDxAmoskeagMillyardWomen https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQNbaKkYk_Q

agonizing indictment of who we are as a human that it feels like in the moment.

3. **Filter what is most useful to you.** You decide what you're going to let in, and how and what you decide to do with the information. Anything said that is meant to be destructive or hurtful is not actually useful information and needs to be ignored. You can sort the remaining feedback into three categories:
 - What you agree with and plan to work on;
 - What you agree with but don't intend to work on (perhaps it is not a priority or it's the flip side of an important strength); and
 - What you believe is inaccurate or misguided.

4. **Decide what you will change, then plan for how you will implement that change.**

ASKING FOR FEEDBACK

FLOW CHART

LEARNING
NEEDS

What do I most want to learn and/or improve upon?

WHO

Who has an interest in me performing well in this area and sees me (or my work) in action? Name at least three people.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

QUESTIONS

What are the open-ended question(s) that will elicit the specific information I need?

ASK AND WAIT

Give each person ample time to think about their feedback for you.
When will you reconnect with each person to hear their feedback?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

LISTEN AND
RESPOND

Do not defend or explain yourself! You're not trying to convince them of anything so just listen, paying extra attention to anything surprising or uncomfortable.

Try to restate their key takeaways and see if they have anything else to add or clarify.

FILTER

Reflect on and write down the key points from your conversation as soon as you leave.

Figure out what is most useful to you and make a plan for how you will act on the advice.

ACT

Make those changes! Check in with those who gave you feedback to see how you are doing.

ASKING FOR FEEDBACK

REFLECTION WORKSHEET

| FEEDBACK 1 | FEEDBACK 2 | FEEDBACK 3 |
|---|---|---|
| What was surprising and/or uncomfortable? | What was surprising and/or uncomfortable? | What was surprising and/or uncomfortable? |
| What about that is important and useful? | What about that is important and useful? | What about that is important and useful? |
| What will I change? | What will I change? | What will I change? |

