



7.12 Responding to Difficult Feedback Handout

Most people are much more interested in giving feedback than in receiving it. This may be the reason why there are fewer resources on receiving feedback than about giving it. It also is not easy to receive and respond to hard or difficult feedback because it is often referred to as criticism and can be seen as negative. The receiver should always try to remember that feedback responses offer the opportunity for learning. Try to follow these steps when receiving feedback.

- ☐ Listen carefully.
- ☐ Try not to let defenses build. Mentally note questions or disagreements.
- ☐ Paraphrase what you think you heard to check your perception.
- ☐ Ask questions for clarification and examples for areas that are unclear or in which disagreement exists. Paraphrase answers again.
- ☐ Carefully evaluate the accuracy and potential value of what you have heard.
- ☐ Gather additional information from other sources or by observing your own behavior and other persons' reactions to it.

How you choose to respond to feedback can actually help you gain new insights about yourself. Your response also can raise your esteem in the person's view that gave you the original feedback.

Keep in mind everyone is vulnerable when criticized and you are even more vulnerable and sensitive if the person knows you well.

"AAA" Approach to Responding to Criticism

Step 1: Acknowledge

Acknowledge you heard the person with a pause (buys time for both to cool down), nod or verbal acknowledgment that demonstrates you heard him or her. Whether the criticism is justified or not, if you attempt to avoid discussing it, it will loom larger in everyone's minds that heard it and stick to you like fly paper as you attempt to move forward. Do not disagree or counterattack; prove that you have heard his or her comment. Perhaps say "I understand you have a concern" rather than "You shouldn't have . . ." Avoid blaming or using *labeling* language such as "That's a lie" or "You don't know what you are saying." You will only pour hot coals on the heat of escalation and harden the person into their position so he or she will want to elaborate.

Step 2: Ask for More

Ask for more information so you both can cool down more and stay focused on the issue, not the feelings or personalities. Go slow in reaching an agreement about how to resolve the criticism. Try to *warm up* to the part of the person you can respect — focus on it mentally and refer to it verbally: "You are so dedicated" or "knowledgeable" or



whatever his or her self-image is that leads them toward making the criticism. The more fully the other person feels or hears, the more likely that he or she will be receptive to your response, whether it is to agree or disagree.

Step 3: Add Your Own

Add your own, asking permission first. If you believe the comments are accurate, then say so. If an apology is in order, give it sooner rather than later. Then, say what you plan to do differently to respond to the criticism. Ask for his or her response to your comments and thank the person again for being thoughtful in offering them. The sooner you verbally agree, the more likely that you will gain respect from the other person and any others who witness the interaction. If you disagree with the comments, say “May I tell you my perspective?” This sets the other person up to give you permission to state your view as you have been willing to listen to theirs.

Additional Ways To Respond to Criticism

Dump Their Stuff Back in Their Lap

If someone is verbally dumping on you, do not interrupt, counter or counterattack in midstream. This will only prolong and intensify their comments. When he or she has finished, ask “Is there anything else you want to add?” Then say, “What would make this situation better?” or “How can we improve this situation in a way you believe we can both accept?”

What Will Make It Better?

Ask the person to propose a solution to the issue he or she has raised. If complaints and/or attacks continue, acknowledge you heard them each time and, like a broken record, repeat yourself in increasingly brief language variations such as “What will make it better?” State your view and what you would like from them. If he or she disagrees, then ask, “What would make this situation better for both of us?” Move the other person from a mode of criticizing to problem solving.

Learn How Personalities Clash

Learn more about your personality type to gain insights into the kind of people who are most likely to have different perspectives than you and why, as well as those you are most likely to criticize. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator[®] (MBTI) is the classic personality test, but there are other tests.

Demonstrate Visible Goodwill Upfront

When criticized, you are more likely to find resolutions more quickly when the other person comes to trust your positive intent. Demonstrate your willingness to find a compromise and ability to be genial, especially if you don’t like the person or the situation. Often the best solution to a criticism leaves both parties a little unhappy but not enough for future retaliation. You are both somewhat satisfied with your compromise and willing to move forward.

**Know That Less is Often Better**

Especially in the beginning, listen more, talk and move less and keep your motions and voice lower and slower. These behaviors increase the chances that others will feel more safe and comfortable around you.

Look to Their Positive Intent, Especially When They Appear to Have None

Disarm the person with a compliment, such as “Thank you for taking the time to give me this feedback.” Try to stay mindful of his or her best side as you engage in responding to the criticism because this will help you be more generous and patient. This might even help him or her to see areas where you might be right after all. The more you can look to the positive intent, the greater the likelihood that you can respond to comments. As you go through life, a general rule is to act as if the people you encounter mean well, especially if it appears differently.