CHAPTER

1

Reacting to Feedback

The process of giving thousands of people feedback on their individual performance has uncovered several clear and defined principles of feedback that generally apply in most interactions involving feedback. We begin by discussing each of those principles.

PRINCIPLE 1

Asking others for input increases their expectation that you will change in a positive way.

Many who receive feedback turn that feedback into measurable change. However, others receiving feedback do not change. This frustrates not only those receiving the feedback, but also those providing the feedback. This leads to a second principle.

PRINCIPLE 2

If you receive feedback but do not change for the better, you will be perceived more negatively than if you had not received feedback.

You can compound your negative feedback by ignoring or rejecting it. When people receive feedback, they react. Their reactions may range from extremely negative to extremely positive, or there may be no visible reaction at all. Regardless of the reaction, a third principle emerges.

PRINCIPLE 3

You will not change what you do not believe needs to be changed.

A personal feedback experience is fundamentally different from looking at a production report or an accounting statement. Even though someone may provide feedback in a way that leaves no room for doubt or difficulty in understanding, this does not necessarily guarantee that people will believe the feedback, or that they will act on it. Those who receive feedback and then make changes or adjustments in their behavior become better people because of the feedback. But there may be a few obstacles along the way including denial.

PRINCIPLE 4

Rather than accept criticism, we tend to denounce not only what is said, but those who say it.

As people move from childhood to adulthood, the maturation process makes us more effective as adults than we were as children. However, because children have not had years of practice in denial, most of them are much more effective at accepting feedback than adults. The extent to which you have developed your denial skills determines the extent to which you accept feedback or question its accuracy.

Denial

To protect ourselves, each of us has developed a useful skill called denial. When we were children and our friends or siblings teased us, we developed the ability to say to ourselves, "They're wrong! I'm not like that."

When you receive feedback from others, if you are like most people, you will pass through some level of denial. If you feel your feedback does not point out any specific areas of change, you may be right, or you may be denying or ignoring some of the data. Likewise, if you think the feedback does not accurately reflect your true performance, again you may be right, or the feedback may be so threatening that you simply rationalize it away.

Minimal denial presents itself as rationalization. At this level, when people receive negative feedback, they

either rationalize that it is not important to change, or perhaps they believe things are "not so bad." People in minimal denial are generally more aware of their rationalizations, and often can be persuaded to accept the feedback.

Moderate denial is less conscious. In this situation, people react to feedback, but they usually do not know why they are reacting. Typically, people in moderate denial display either more emotion or almost no emotion. Some people in moderate denial confront those who provided negative feedback. Others have no emotional reaction to negative feedback, and try to minimize its importance.

Those who experience *advanced denial* are not at all conscious that they are in denial. They may act as experts and assertively deny that a problem exists, or they may totally ignore the problem. The difference is they are not consciously aware of their denial.

One key to understanding the feedback you receive is to work through your denial, and accept that the perceptions of others are, in fact, reality.

PRINCIPLE 5

All perceptions are real, at least to those who own them.

Experience suggests that the most productive approach to handle feedback is to assume they are real.

After reviewing his feedback on how well he gives instructions, and discovering the very low ratings given him by his direct reports, Steve commented, "They're wrong; I give

great instructions. Those guys are just too dense to understand. The problem is not with my instructions; it's with the audience I give them to."

Steve believed that his perceptions were real and others' perceptions were wrong. Steve may be effective at giving instructions to highly trained personnel, but if his job requires that his direct reports understand his instructions, and if his instructions confuse those people, then he is not effective at giving instructions. Therefore, the perceptions of the people he manages are real.

Even when perceptions are completely inaccurate, they still represent reality. The following vignette illustrates this point:

Suppose I were to build a structurally sound and safe bridge that adheres to all laws and principles of engineering. But, because of the unique design of the bridge, most people perceive that my bridge is not safe or structurally sound.

Although it is clear to me that those perceptions are not true, to the people who believe the bridge is unsafe, their perceptions are real. If the bridge was built to help people cross a river, but people think the bridge is unsafe and therefore do not use the bridge, of what value would the bridge be?

Balance

When receiving feedback, some reactive behaviors are counterproductive. However, productive behaviors are not always the simple opposites of counterproductive

behaviors. For example, one counterproductive behavior is rationalization. When people over rationalize the feedback they receive, they convince themselves that nothing is wrong. They discount the feedback or even reject it outright. Such actions are counterproductive. However, the opposite behavior, taking the feedback too literally, is also counterproductive. For example, some recipients accept feedback at face value without considering reasons why the feedback could be wrong, or they read more into the feedback than was originally intended.

PRINCIPLE 6

Balancing your normal but counterproductive reactions to feedback is essential in effectively dealing with feedback.

Balance is the key to effectively dealing with feedback. For example, you must be able to balance between rationalization and taking feedback too literally. Effectively dealing with feedback may require some rationalization, but it may also require you to take some results at face value.

Those who deal most effectively with feedback are those who maintain a proper balance between counterproductive behaviors. For most people, such balance is difficult to achieve. Most people want to be told to do one thing and not another, but balance requires that we do a little of one and a little of the other, and not carry any one behavior to an extreme.

The following are four extremes or common coping strategies used in processing feedback that require balance:

1. Rationalization versus literal acceptance
2. Fight versus flight
3. "That's interesting" versus "that's terrible"
4. Paralysis of analysis versus ignorance is bliss

Rationalization versus Literal Acceptance. When people rationalize the results of their feedback, they often are trying to justify their own behavior while avoiding the underlying sources of the problem. To accept feedback from others, you must balance rationalization with taking feedback too literally.

Jill's feedback described her as an ineffective listener. When asked about the results, Jill said, "I know some of my associates don't think I listen to them, but they're wrong. I do listen. I just don't show them how well I listen. Besides, in some positions, managers have to pay a lot of attention to the people who report to them, and hold their hands. But my job isn't like that, and my people don't need it. I listen to others the same way my boss listens to me."

Jill rationalized her feedback. Some people have great rationalizing skills. Rationalizing typically involves making excuses, justifying behavior, or discrediting the feedback, and is a counterproductive behavior. We often respond to rationalization by encouraging people to accept their feedback at face value. However, some managers avoid having

to think too deeply by accepting the results of their feedback surveys too literally.

As he reviewed his feedback, John showed the facilitator that his boss had rated him very highly in technical competence, but his peers and those who reported to him had rated him well below average in the same area. John had rated himself highly in technical competence. He asked the facilitator, "Who is right?"

The facilitator replied, "Both are right."

In frustration John responded, "No, I'm either technically competent or incompetent. I can't be both."

People don't always completely agree on the meaning of feedback results, because we all respond differently to the same experiences. For example, how many times have you gone to a movie with a friend and, walking away, remarked how great it was, only to have your friend remark that he or she had not liked it at all?

To accept feedback, we frequently need to balance what some people say against the differing opinions of others. John accepted the feedback from his peers and those who reported from him once he realized that his boss's criteria for technical competence differed from theirs.

Fight versus Flight. Another common strategy for dealing with feedback is to fight. To accept feedback from others, you must balance the reaction to fight against feedback with the desire to run away from it.

In response to her feedback, Jennifer told the facilitator: "I think you gave me another person's feedback. It's a simple error; I know how easily it can happen."

The facilitator told her the feedback had been checked and verified, but Jennifer still did not believe it. She reviewed the written comments to see if they applied to the situations in her department. And although she agreed that some of the written comments were about her, others did not sound right.

Over the next four days, the facilitator called the office six times, generated a computerized listing of all the results, and even calculated scores by hand to verify that it had been, in fact, Jennifer's feedback. But, despite every new piece of evidence, Jennifer looked for other problems. After four days of evidence, phone calls, and computer printouts, Jennifer finally concluded that she had given the surveys to the wrong people.

Jennifer's reaction to her feedback was to fight. Her rejection of the feedback prevented her from having to change, but it also kept her from improving. The issues she faced didn't go away just because she refused to listen. Her case is similar to a case study used in many introductory psychology classes:[1]

A patient in a mental institution believed he was dead. The therapist assigned to the patient spent one hour every day talking about what dead people do that is different from people who are alive.

The therapist asked, "Can dead people talk?"

"Yes, dead people can talk," replied the patient.

The therapist reviewed the patient's every behavior, thought process, and physical characteristic until finally, after weeks of therapy, he asked the patient, "Do dead people bleed?"

"No," replied the patient, "dead people don't bleed."

The therapist became ecstatic. He was sure he had finally found the cure. He grabbed the patient's hand, pricked it with a small pin, and watched the patient's reaction. As the patient watched the blood ooze from his finger, he looked astonished.

Looking up at the therapist, the patient exclaimed, "Gee, I guess I was wrong. Dead people *do* bleed."

Although fighting feedback or trying to prove it wrong may be counterproductive, the other extreme, "flight," can also be counterproductive. People who engage in flight or escape behavior often believe that negative feedback is more negative than actually reported. One manager reviewed her results and commented, "I always knew I was bad; this simply confirms it." While people in fight mode tend to disagree with their surveys, those in flight mode often hide from, ignore, or allow themselves to be destroyed by the results. This tactic allows them to avoid correcting the problem by escaping from it.

Why is the process of receiving feedback so threatening? Most people spend an exorbitant amount of time and energy trying to hide any evidence of incompetence. This is one of the reasons people go to school, get degrees, become supervisors, seek impressive titles, and

hang plaques on their walls. However, we all retain some level of incompetence in many life areas. Most people have a few fears tucked away in the back of their minds about what could happen if others knew they were not competent.

Ellen's mood changed from enthusiastic and bubbly to gloomy when she received her feedback. Each page of the survey felt like a knife stabbing into her back. As Ellen read through the written comments, she shook her head in disbelief.

As the day ended, the facilitator pulled Ellen aside and asked her to stay and talk for a few minutes. As soon as everyone had left the room, the facilitator asked, "So Ellen, how is it going?"

That was all it took to release the torrents of tears she had been saving up for almost three hours. Ellen showed her report to the facilitator. Although she found herself above the norm in most areas, she had been below the norm in several others. Written comments pointed out weaknesses: "Ellen never really lets me know where I stand. She always tells me I'm doing fine, but I don't really believe her, because she tells everybody that."

Ellen had described herself as a very positive person. She felt that since taking over the group she had won the friendship of most of the employees in the group, and that they had become her friends. But how could they have done this to her? How could they have said such negative things if they were friends?

Ellen's data actually had been much more positive than that of several others in the class, and nothing in her survey's written comments had been extremely negative. The next

day, several other participants shared their results with her. After seeing how negative people could be, Ellen came to realize that the results of her survey had been quite good. At that point, she began to acknowledge some of the criticism without feeling as if she had been stabbed in the back.

"That's Interesting" versus "That's Terrible." Although some people believe receiving negative feedback means the end of the world, other people read their results as if the data were an unrelated technical report. To accept feedback from others, you must balance underreaction with overreaction to feedback.

Because many of us have a bias toward rational, unemotional, and logical analysis, many people develop a "that's interesting" view toward their feedback. One engineer who had received extremely negative data remarked, "These are very interesting results, and I'm going to study them until I understand them fully."

Cigarette smoking is a useful analogy. Most people who smoke understand that smoking is hazardous to their health, and many smokers know they ought to quit. But, even though people know smoking is not good for them, and they would like to quit, many never do because they do not have a large enough "felt need."

One man, after attempting to quit smoking several times, finally succeeded. He said, "I was able to quit when I wanted to quit more than I wanted to smoke." He quit when he had a large enough "felt need" to change.

The other side of "that's interesting" is similar to the flight mentality. In the "that's terrible" mind-set, partici-

pants react as if they are shattered by each negative response in the survey. People who don't feel a strong need to change, but who continue to get negative feedback, often begin to make plans to find another position in the company or to move to another company. They will do anything rather than discuss the results and consider appropriate changes.

Paralysis of Analysis versus Ignorance Is Bliss. To accept feedback from others, you must analyze the results well enough to understand the data and its implications, without getting so caught up in the analysis that you never reach any conclusions.

Kathy, a nuclear physicist, began to analyze her data when it came back on Monday morning. By Friday, she had compiled two pages of notes for each page of results. Instead of summarizing the results, Kathy actually generated more results than she started with. She stated several times that she intended to further analyze the data "at a later time."

By the time Kathy returned to her regular duties, several pressing issues required her immediate attention, and she had to set aside her continuing analysis of the data for a while. She never did formulate any solid conclusions about her survey, even though she had put more work into its analysis than any other participant.

Contrast Kathy's paralyzing reaction to feedback with Rand's:

Rand heard the assignment clearly: "Find at least three areas that need improvement and list them in the action planning booklet."

Rand breezed through the numeric data and written comments and found what he was looking for—the most negative items. He quickly read the first three items, transferred them word for word into his booklet, and put down his pen. He raised his hand and said, "I'm done. What now?"

Rand might have also considered the following questions: "Am I sure these are the most important issues?" "How do these issues correlate with the written comments?" "Will changes in these areas have the greatest impact on how I am perceived as a manager?" And, perhaps he should have considered the fourth most negative item. It read: "Fails to make decisions based on the best available data."

When you receive feedback, you must be willing to dig in and consider the facts without getting bogged down in their analysis.

A Healthy Attitude about Feedback

If perceptions are reality, and striking an appropriate balance is important, what is the most effective way to process feedback? One way is to improve your attitude toward receiving feedback.

Situations in which no feedback is given can be frustrating. Even negative feedback helps us know where we stand, and it often contains some suggestions for improvement. Imagine how you would feel after putting a

lot of effort into studying a subject for an extended period of time, taking a test on the material, and then never being allowed to find out how well you performed on the test. You would never be able to learn or improve.

A bad situation is one in which no feedback is available, or when it's only available in the form of getting terminated. Fortunately, most situations, even the most frustrating ones, do not fit this definition. Feedback typically abounds in any situation, but our reaction to the feedback often clouds our thinking and discourages other people from offering the feedback. We should perceive feedback as a welcome opportunity, not a dreaded obligation. Having an appropriate attitude toward feedback can be extremely beneficial.

PRINCIPLE 7

The process of change begins with accepting the feedback given.

Consider the following helpful ideas about how to look at feedback:

- ⊡ I enjoy feedback. I constantly look for ways to receive feedback, because of the learning opportunities offered.
- ⊡ I know feedback is difficult to give, and it is often uncomfortable for others to provide. Attacking those who provide feedback only prevents me from getting more feedback in the future. I let others know their

input is valuable. I appreciate the fact that other people took the time, effort, and personal risk to provide feedback, even if I do not agree with it.

- ⊡ I would rather receive negative feedback than no feedback at all.
- ⊡ Feedback can be both positive and negative, but I first consider the positive to reinforce the things I do well. I avoid dwelling on the negative and expecting the worst.
- ⊡ The only people who are truly incompetent are those who refuse to listen to and accept feedback from others. No one is perfect, but those who come closest are those who continually try to improve based on the feedback they receive from others.
- ⊡ Receiving negative feedback does not mean I am the worst person that ever lived. It only means that someone cares enough to tell me how to improve. If we really dislike someone, the last thing we would do is tell them how to improve.
- ⊡ I believe I can change and improve. Others expect me to do something in response to their feedback, and I will find at least one thing I can do something about. I will make changes and then report to those who provided the feedback about the things I have chosen not to change and the areas I would like to change.

To improve your ability to accept feedback, it is helpful to first understand how others form impressions of you. Understanding this process should help you to balance your reactions to feedback.