Feedback That Lands

Receiving it and giving it

By

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Scope

Why criticism is hard to hear, how to receive it well, and how to give feedback that lands.

Use

Read it as a page, or present it full screen. The full text is the article Feedback That Lands.

Five chapters.
One exercise to close.

01	A guiding principle	Slide 03
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A guiding principle.
Everything else follows from it.

“Feedback is your relationship with the world and the world’s relationship with you; it’s how you impact others, for better or worse. So it’s all around you—the question is just whether you’re paying attention to it.”

Sheila Heen
Harvard Law School lecturer and co-founder of Triad Consulting Group

Feedback is about what you do.
It does not define who you are.

Skilled people make feedback a positive experience. Everyone leaves feeling valued, even when the input is challenging.

Feedback is a gift.
Choose it with the same care.

When you pick a gift for your partner or your best friend, you think about what is right, wrap it, and write a thoughtful card. A comment thrown over your shoulder as you leave a meeting will not help anyone grow.

Chapter 02

Receiving it well.
Five steps, from the first moment to the follow-up.

01 Respond, do not react

02 Consider its value and context

03 Corroborate and challenge

04 Turn it into a goal

05 Return to the source

Why it is hard to hear

Negativity bias

Negative experiences have a bigger psychological impact on us than positive experiences of the same size.

In practice

However often you hear good things about your work, the one time it went wrong is the one that sticks.

So what

The good parts need more effort to reinforce. And critical feedback needs more care to land.

“Receiving feedback does not mean I am the worst person ever. It only means someone cares enough to tell me how to improve.”

Joseph Folkman
The Power of Feedback

We move through five stages.
The work is getting to the fourth.

Discard	“This has nothing to do with me.”
Defend	“No, that’s not how it was.”
Explain	“Yes, but…”
Understand	You listen and accept.
Change, reinforce, or remain	You process the feedback and make a conscious choice.

Respond, do not react.
Decide later what it means to you.

01

Listen

Unless you are a surgeon or a bomb defuser, feedback rarely needs action in the moment.

02

Clarify

Ask for real-world examples until you understand what the person means.

03

Thank

Even if you did not like it. Thanking is not agreeing, and it buys you time.

Listen to understand.
Not to answer.

01

Empathetic understanding

I understand what you are saying, what you mean, and how you feel.

02

Listening is not agreeing

I listen to understand your point of view, not to accept it.

03

Ready to listen

No phone, no laptop, no distractions.

Step 02 of 05

Consider its value and its context

Keep it in proportion

Feedback is only one facet of who you are, and it can be inaccurate or biased.

Ask yourself

Did I ask for it? Who gave it, and how do they relate to my work?

Check what it is about

Is it about how I do something, or about how I am? Being told to be a different person is not much help.

Corroborate and challenge.
One view is not the truth.

Ask trusted colleagues, sponsors, mentors, and peers whether they recognise the behaviour.
Then you are not changing on the strength of one person's view.

Step 04 of 05

Turn it into a goal with a plan

The goal

What is the goal, and what will change once I reach it?

The way there

What are the steps along the way, and who can support me?

The proof

How will I measure my progress, and how will I celebrate it? Without a plan, a goal is only an idea.

Return to the source.
Close the loop.

Unless the feedback turned out to be poor or biased, tell the person what you made of it, even if you decided not to act on it. They learn their input was considered, and they are more likely to give feedback again.

“We can’t just sit back and wait for feedback to be offered, particularly when we’re in a leadership role. If we want feedback to take root in the culture, we need to ask for it explicitly.”

Ed Batista
Coach and lecturer

Chapter 03

Giving it well.
Care, rules, structure, and practice.

01 Care personally, challenge directly

02 Ground rules

03 Tone of voice

04 Structure it with E.A.R.N.

05 Tips for delivering it

06 Examples

After Kim Scott, Radical Candor

Care personally, challenge directly.
Do both, or the feedback fails.

→ Care personally

Ruinous empathy

You care but do not challenge. Vague praise, sugar-coated criticism, or silence.

Radical Candor

You care personally and challenge directly.

Manipulative insincerity

You do neither. Flattery to someone's face, harsh criticism behind their back.

Obnoxious aggression

You challenge but do not show you care. Brutal honesty.

Challenge directly →

Challenging people shows you care.
It does not make you right.

Most of us were told as children to say nothing if we have nothing nice to say. Then we become the boss, and saying the difficult thing is suddenly the job. Share your view directly, and humbly.

Eight ground rules.
The first four are about you.

Speak from the “I”	Say “When this happens, I feel…”. Nobody can argue with what you feel.
Do not prescribe the fix	Ask questions that help them reflect, explore, and experiment.
Put the stinky fish on the table	The longer you hide what you do not want to say, the worse it gets.
Drop positive and negative	It is feedback: critical in its thinking, not in its tone.

Eight ground rules.
The last four are about them.

Be concrete and actionable	A specific moment, not “you always do this”, and something they can change.
Pick the time, ask permission	Choose a quiet moment. If today is a bad day, follow up another time.
Concentrate on behaviour	We control our behaviour, not always our feelings. Leave character alone.
Do not trigger anxiety	Never write “Can I give you some feedback?” and then leave them waiting.

Four habits keep the tone right.
Each one separates two things.

01

Observe

Neutral observations, kept apart from interpretation and judgement.

02

Feel

Your feelings, kept apart from reasons and interpretation.

03

Need

The deeper motive behind the feeling.

04

Request

Clear, concrete, and feasible, with no demand hidden inside.

Structure it with E.A.R.N.

It keeps the focus on behaviour.

E

Event

What was the situation?

A

Action

What behaviour did you observe?

R

Result

What was the impact or consequence?

N

Next steps

Which behaviours should continue, and which should change?

Put together, it sounds like this.

Event	“During yesterday’s remote team meeting...”
Action	“You were texting on your phone throughout...”
Result	“When we have time set aside for meetings, it’s important that you’re present and focused. By being on your phone, you are neither...”
Next steps	“How would you feel about leaving your phone at your desk during meetings, or only answering it in an emergency?”

How you deliver it matters.
Where, when, and how often.

Personalise the relationship	Learn up front how each person prefers to give and receive feedback.
Skip the sandwich	Do not hide criticism between two slices of praise. Give feedback often instead.
Deliver it privately	Never embarrass people in front of their peers.
Allow breathing room	A few hours, or a day if they are upset. Not more than 24 hours.

Make it a conversation.
Not a verdict.

Give it in the morning	Sooner rather than later. When we are tired, we are more likely to reject it.
Do not lecture	Aim for an even split between questions and statements.
Offer constructive praise	High-performing teams receive nearly six times more positive feedback.

Describe the behaviour.
Leave the person alone.

Say this

Describe what happened

“I feel like you’re not listening to me when you finish my sentences for me. You did that a few times when we were talking about the project plan. I’d prefer to finish what I’m saying before you add your points.”

Not this

Judge or label

“You are autocratic.” “You are inflexible.” Even “You are creative” is a label. Look at what the person does or says instead.

Focus on the outcome.
Not on changing them.

Say this

Name the impact

“It’s frustrating for me to lose valuable time with you: if you arrive late, we can’t discuss everything we aimed for. We need to get this right, because the team needs a good decision from us.”

Not this

Try to change them

“This is precisely what caused the trouble last time. If you could work early shifts, we could meet at 7 am, and this would be solved.”

Speak plainly.
Vague feedback tells them nothing.

Say this

Be clear about the ask

“The whole team needs to understand the impact of wide-screen on our future development plans. I’ve noticed that you haven’t kept your team up to date on this. So you should include wide-screen updates in all your team meetings.”

Not this

Stay vague

“Well, it’s pretty obvious what’s going wrong here.”

“Can I talk to you about the start of our meeting today? Would you like to hear some feedback and my ideas? I’d like us to get more out of our meetings.”

Say that you would like to give feedback
Then let them choose the moment

Keep practising.
It gets easier every time.

Feedback is a muscle.
Train it regularly.

It gets easier the more you practise, and the more trust a team has. A healthy team gives feedback broadly and often, and receives it the same way.

Act on what you hear.
Or people stop telling you.

How you react to feedback is as important as your openness to it. What you do with it says a lot about your potential.

“Every day, leave at least one thing unsaid.”

Choosing what not to give matters too.

A group exercise.
Put the principle into practice.

Skilled people make feedback a positive experience. Everyone leaves feeling valued, even when the input is challenging.

One sticky note for every other person in the group

Dear [name].

One thing I appreciate most about you is [...].

One thing I would like to see more of is [...].

Write, share, thank.

In that order, and out loud.

01

Write

Five minutes. Address each note, complete both sentences, and sign it. Keep it short.

02

Share

One by one, read your notes out loud and hand each one to the person it is for.

03

Thank

The person receiving each note says: “Thank you for your feedback.”

Further reading.
Where this material comes from.

Radical Candor	Our approach
Quartz	How to take critical feedback
Shopify UX	There’s no “I” in feedback
Hyper Island Toolbox	Feedback: I appreciate...
Tash Willcocks	Giving and receiving feedback in teams

About what you do.
Never about who you are.

The full text is the article Feedback That Lands. The slides are open source under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0: use them, adapt them, and share them alike.

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