



Episode 25. How to Handle Negative Feedback

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Today, let's talk about how to handle negative feedback. Because we live in a world that is full of feedback. Some of it is positive and can make us feel happy and proud inside, like maybe when we receive spontaneous praise or a positive comment on social media. And some of the feedback we receive is negative. We know that we're supposed to think of constructive feedback as a "gift," although receiving negative feedback can really hurt. It can feel demoralizing and personal, and make you doubt yourself.

Today, let's try to take the sting out of negative feedback by helping you find a more empowered way to approach it and think about it.

First, I want to share a personal example of some tough feedback I received years ago. I was called out on an email listserv. Here's what happened: My neighborhood has an email listserv that's primarily used for asking for recommendations for service providers and offering household items that people are giving away. Once in a while, though, the listserv gets contentious. A number of years ago, we had a neighbor who was always sending out emails that forcefully went against the popular opinion.

Other people would write follow-up emails criticizing him. And I would just read all of the posts and ignore them. One day, though, this person posted a message attacking a friend of mine in a way that I thought was unfair. I reacted immediately and sent an email to the entire neighborhood criticizing him and his message. Then he immediately responded, again to the whole neighborhood, pointing out that I never stood up for him when he was unfairly criticized. I interpreted this feedback as him saying that I was a hypocrite.

My first reaction was to be incensed and indignant. How dare he criticize me for sticking up for someone who, in my opinion, was unfairly attacked? You know that feeling of getting all worked up inside? That was me.

That night, I happened to have a meeting with a mentor of mine, someone I admire, someone with immense wisdom. I told her this story in all of my indignation, and ended by saying, can you believe he said that? And instead of immediately agreeing with me, she paused and gently said, maybe there is something in his email that might be helpful to you. If there was a kernel of truth in his message, what might that be?

That was a question that was hard for me to hear. Because when we receive feedback from a source we might not think so highly of, it's easy to get judgmental and discount it. It can actually feel good in our brain to be in this judgmental space and see ourselves above other people. When we think we're right, our brain gets a hit of dopamine, a feel-good neurotransmitter.

I was lucky to have my mentor to process this with. She helped me see that the helpful piece of this feedback was an opportunity to think more about my values, and the values that I lived into in my digital presence. I have strong values about fairness and respect, and while I honored those values sticking up

for my friend, maybe I could honor them more and speak up whenever anyone was treated unfairly online.

Shifting my thinking about this feedback took a lot of mental effort and a major perspective change. It required me to be brave and honest with myself.

There are 2 steps to turning negative feedback into helpful feedback.

Step # 1 is to ask and answer this question: If there was something in this feedback that might be helpful for me, what would it be?

Because feedback is, at its essence, data. It is just pieces of information, and information itself is not inherently positive or negative; it's just data. It is our brains, our self-view, and our past experiences that bring the emotionality to the feedback. If we can learn to put a little more space between the data and our emotions, we can think about it more calmly and clearly.

Sometimes, when I talk with my clients about feedback, I use the analogy of mail. A few years ago, I heard author Glennon Doyle liken feedback to mail, you know, old fashioned mail that comes in an envelope and is delivered to your home.

Think about the mail you get. If you're like me, you get different kinds. You get junk mail – flyers, offers, circulars—and you get what I call good mail – cards, checks, or even packages. Once in a while, you might even get mail that's addressed to your neighbor and not even meant for you.

Here's the thing: you get to decide which type of mail feedback is. You can treat the information like junk mail and mentally throw it away, or you could see it as good mail, and ask yourself, what's valuable about this data I received? How might it help me grow, become more empathetic, or broaden my perspective in the world?

Step #1 is to look for the value in the data and information you receive, given where you are and where you want to go. Consider the feedback in the context of the relationships you care about and the personal and professional goals you have set for yourself.

Step #2 is about preempting constructive feedback to have more control over the information and the data you receive. Because there are ways to ask for constructive feedback that will feel less painful and more helpful.

What this takes is confidence and clarity. First, it takes confidence to be proactive and ask for constructive feedback. Second, it takes clarity around the data and information that you truly want to gather.

When people ask for constructive feedback, the biggest mistake they make is to be nonspecific and ask a question that is too broad, like, "What feedback do you have for me?" If you have ever asked this question, please listen up so that you can change your approach.

When you want constructive feedback from someone, you need to take a moment ahead of time, to think about the data you really want to gather. Let's say that you gave a big presentation and you want feedback to understand what you might do differently next time. Before you ask your manager for feedback, ask yourself, what specifically do I want to know? Do you want to know about your tone? Your body language? How you engaged the group? How you responded when you didn't know the answer to

a question? There are so many pieces of information you might be curious about. If you ask an open-ended question, like what feedback do you have for me, you have no control over what the feedback provider shares. You have no idea whether this information will be helpful data or junk mail.

Instead, think about what you really want to know and ask those questions specifically. In your debrief meeting, you could say, I would love feedback about my presentation in a few areas, and then ask your specific questions.

This is a much more brain-friendly way to ask for feedback. Not only will your brain be calmer because it will feel more in control, your brain will also be more open and prepared to receive the feedback because you have a clearer idea about the data you'll receive.

So let's bring this to you. In the next few weeks, build more confidence and ease with feedback by remembering these 2 steps to make negative feedback more helpful.

First, change your mindset and see feedback as pieces of information. Look for the data that might be helpful in all of that junk mail.

Second, help your brain change its relationship to constructive feedback by being more proactive. Ask for the specific information you want, given your personal and professional growth areas.

Remember, our mindset creates our reality. Shifting your mindset around feedback and recognizing what is and is not in your control around it will build your comfort and confidence with both receiving and giving feedback.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you found today's podcast helpful, please share it with a friend. And if you want to build more strategies to handle negative feedback, email me at deb@debelbaum.com. I am here to help you think effectively, so that you can show up as your best self.

Until next time!