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## How Leaders Can Use Negative Feedback to Their Advantage

**Dr. Angeliki Papasava**

Online Faculty, University of Roehampton London Online, England

Part-time Lecturer, UNICAF

Visiting Professor, ISEG Paris, France

Global Online Tutor, Edinburgh Napier University, Scotland

Online Tutor, Graduate Diploma Management, Cambridge Education Group, UK

### **Abstract:**

*This short article explores how leaders can use negative feedback to their advantage by identifying their weaknesses and turning them into strengths. In order to enable their peers to give them true feedback, leaders should nurture a safe environment of trust where people are not afraid to share their honest opinion. Through the use of secondary data, the author gives practical advice to business leaders on how to use negative feedback in order to improve their leadership qualities. The article examines methods that leaders can use in order to turn criticism into a plan for personal growth and development.*

*The key conclusions of the article are that negative feedback should be embraced by leaders and it should be used as a guide for becoming better at what they do. When receiving negative criticism, leaders should try to improve their work performance and change in a positive and proactive manner. Finally, leaders should use negative feedback as a tool to strengthen their relationship with their teams.*

**Keywords:** *negative feedback, performance, leadership, criticism*

Leadership involves both giving and receiving feedback. There are many studies on how leaders should give feedback and several different schools of thought. But how do true leaders receive feedback and use it in order to improve themselves and to discover opportunities for development?

Peter Drucker wrote that the only way to discover one's strengths is through analysing feedback. And many times, through criticism leaders can understand their weak points and work on improving them in order to become more successful. Negative feedback can hold a lot of important information and should not be ignored. This is why, leaders should be resilient and develop their ability to filter feedback without letting emotion prevail (Wilson, 2012).

According to Schwarz (2014), an expert in leadership and organisational psychology, leaders must be open to listening to employees who identify their weak points. Although criticism may be uncomfortable to hear, it is a "not-so-nicely wrapped" gift. "Effective leaders open these gifts, regardless of the wrapping, to learn what they are doing that's negatively affecting others on their team."

A study that took place by Leadership IQ, reveals that people who cannot accept feedback have a higher chance of failing in the business world. Mark Murphy, the founder of Leadership IQ states that high performers do well because of their ability to accept feedback as a means of fueling personal growth (2015).

Another study revealed that the most effective leaders are the ones who frequently ask for feedback. Joseph Folkman, the president of Zenger Folkman, the company which performed the study, states that "People who are at the bottom 10% in terms of their willingness to ask for feedback—their leadership effectiveness scores were at the 17th percentile, but the people who were at the top 10%, who were absolutely willing to ask for feedback, their leadership effectiveness scores were at the 83rd percentile. It's like the worse they are as a leader, the less likely they are to ask for feedback because they're afraid they'll hear the truth, and the better people are the more they keep asking 'How am I doing? Would you change anything?'"

In their article "How Positive and Negative Feedback Motivate Goal Pursuit", Fishbach, Eyal and Finkelstein (2010), write that after reviewing research of positive and negative feedback on individuals they concluded that it only makes an impact to the ones who were committed to make progress in achieving their goals. Beginners are more interested with assessing their commitment and they tend to achieve goals when they receive positive rather than negative feedback. Experts are interested in observing their progress towards goals and tend to adhere to goals after receiving negative rather than positive feedback.

Leaders should be the ones initiating feedback. Increasing one's receptivity to other people's input is not enough. In work environments, it is highly unlikely for direct reports, colleagues or peers to offer their feedback (positive or negative) without being asked. It is the leader's task to ask for a genuine assessment of how they are doing (Kouzes & Posner, 2014). While asking for candid feedback, leaders should create a safe environment where people around them are not afraid to give their honest opinion.

According to the neurologist Judy Willis, performance should be related with positive emotion and leaders need to foster it in order to ensure that everyone learns from feedback. This of course does not mean that leaders should avoid confrontation or only offer comfort and support. It means that they should be highly receptive of people's readiness for a challenge as well as their emotional state at the moment of giving feedback. In order to create safety and trust, leaders should create an environment where individuals get to know each other. This can be accomplished by making an effort to understand colleagues and individuals by appealing to a more personal side. For example, taking the time to find out how one's week end was, strengthens creates a feeling of knowing each other.

Another way of creating a safe environment, is by talking about emotions. Discussing emotions is critical for anyone who wants to share effective feedback. This is because feedback may generate some difficult feelings, therefore, leaders who create a culture where feelings such as frustration, disappointment, embarrassment and even anger are discussed, offer a safe environment for true and honest feedback.

Finally, leaders should allow their peers to take their own time in order to give feedback. People who feel obliged to say yes, every time they are asked to give their feedback will not feel free enough or even ready enough to speak the truth. Having the freedom to postpone their feedback, enables participants to become willing parties.

Accepting the gift of criticism can help leaders become more effective as they are more curious and compassionate. Schwarz writes "You are creating the trust needed to talk about things that really matter and that will lead to better results. This type of gift is priceless."

A study performed by Zenger and Folkman revealed that confident leaders prefer receiving negative feedback. Leaders who are able to give honest and straightforward feedback are also the ones who prefer to receive corrective feedback from their peers.

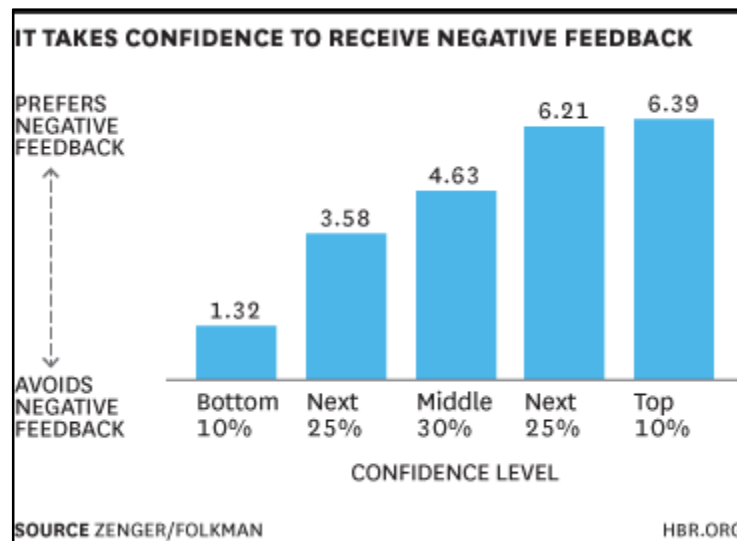


Figure 1

So, how can leaders turn negative feedback into something positive? Jacquelyn Smith, a Forbes expert, gives some effective techniques to her readers:

1. Negative feedback should be accepted and necessary changes should be made. It can be used as a planning guide and a chance to sharpen one's skills, gain more knowledge and become a better person.
2. Intentions should be perceived as good. Just because a leader may receive negative feedback, it does not mean that the person who gave it has a hidden agenda. Leaders should keep in mind that they are not being criticized personally, it is their work that needs improvement. This will result to positive changes.
3. Negative feedback can be used as a chance to clarify goals and expectations. According to Thorman, leaders should be proactive about understanding their role and make the necessary improvements.
4. Negative feedback could also be viewed as an opportunity for bonding with colleagues. Regular meetings can be scheduled in order to discuss progress and goals. Asking for a mentor to help, could also be very helpful. A leader does not know everything, sometimes an expert can lead to tremendous results.
5. Negative feedback gives ground for self-reflection. It can be used as an opportunity to improve behaviours and attitudes.
6. The way leaders handle negative feedback, also is a chance for proving how open they are to change and growth. Leaders can show their followers how mature, cooperative and able they are to embrace change.
7. Finally, leaders should keep in mind that candid feedback is a sign of people wanting to help them do better. Accepting the feedback and recognizing it's worth, will help leaders become much better in what they are doing.

As C. Wakeman states, people who are mining the experience for the greatest lesson should do all they can to develop and improve themselves. Leaders who can try to embrace negative feedback as useful and alter their reactions accordingly, can achieve amazing results. As everything else in life, negative feedback can either be viewed as a threat or an opportunity. A leader who reacts to it as an opportunity, will make the most out of constructive criticism and will evolve both personally and professionally.

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