GIVING FEEDBACK

Don’t Let Your Brain’s Defense Mechanisms Thwart Effective Feedback

by James R. Detert and Ethan R. Burris

August 18, 2016

The human brain is highly protective, leading us to sense and respond to danger automatically. This is quite useful when the threat is real, be it a hungry bear or a livid boss. But often we perceive more danger than there really is, and that can be debilitating.

Think, for example, how easy it is to psych ourselves out (and read the response as “negative”) when we initiate an honest but difficult conversation with a peer or boss. And think how easy it is to feel attacked and raw when we’re on the receiving end of tough

feedback, whether or not the person giving it is actually offensive, defensive, or angry. Because we seldom test these reactions for accuracy, our thoughts quickly spiral to a place where they are no longer useful. Our sensitive "danger radar" make us feel safer in the short-term but can undermine our long-term goals — for instance, having honest conversations that allow for learning while leaving both parties feeling psychologically intact.

So how do we learn to challenge our automatic, often inaccurate, thought patterns and replace them with more realistic and productive interpretations? That's the question addressed by "cognitive behavior therapy" (CBT), pioneered decades ago by psychiatrist Aaron Beck and others to help us become less trapped by feelings of fear, insecurity, doubt, and loss of confidence that come with distorted thinking.

To get a sense of how this can work in an organizational setting, consider the following types of cognitive traps we've seen many times in our years of research on "voice" and silence in the workplace. Below each of the descriptions and disguised examples, we explain how people can use classic CBT principles and techniques to reframe their initial, automatic thoughts, and become much better at giving and receiving feedback productively.

All-or-nothing thinking: Seeing things as black or white, completely good or bad.

Example of distortion: A manager who was generally good about receiving input still frustrated his employees by asking them for round after round of research and data to support their ideas before moving forward. Why? Because when he thought about implementing the suggestions or presenting them to his own bosses, he became paralyzed by thoughts like "*If this doesn't go perfectly, I'll look like a total idiot*" and "*If we're wrong about this, our careers here will be over.*"

An alternative interpretation: In reality, most ideas aren't perfect when first implemented, and they often have mixed results. But waiting around until ideas are perfect often means never acting at all — which means it's usually better to adopt them as soon as you can

reasonably gauge their potential and then make improvements based on observations and feedback. So, break the paralysis by learning to replace that initial black-and-white thinking with more realistic interpretations like "*If this doesn't go perfectly, we'll have plenty of data to justify our initial decision, and we'll adjust quickly"* and *"If we're wrong about this, it will be disappointing, but we'll also learn a lot."* This kind of mindset is grounded in the knowledge that we can learn and improve rather than a mistaken belief that we're either perfect right out of the gate or utter failures.

Overgeneralization: Mistaking a single negative event as an overall, enduring pattern.

Example of distortion: An employee gave her boss feedback on his proposal, as he'd requested. When he reacted defensively, she got flustered and failed to calmly and convincingly explain the logic behind her critiques. Afterward, she told herself, "*I screwed that one up, just like always*," and vowed to be less forthcoming next time.

An alternative interpretation: If she had pushed herself to come up with examples of feedback-giving that went well for her, this employee could have readily done so. It would have been both healthier and more accurate for her to conclude, "*I blew that one, but my general track record is still very good*." Words like "always" and "never" are red flags — and useful reminders to think more carefully about what could be happening in each specific situation.

Catastrophizing: Negatively exaggerating the size, scope, length, magnitude, or importance of an event, thought, or feeling.

Example of distortion: When asked why they were afraid to speak up at work, several managers at one multinational company said things like *"I don't want to lose my job by telling the truth."*

An alternative interpretation: They couldn't provide examples of people actually being fired, though — they'd never seen it happen. So they almost certainly would have benefited from reframing their initial fears, perhaps along these lines: "*If I speak up and it goes poorly, it will be uncomfortable, but we'll all get over it"* or *"Telling the truth might briefly make my manager angry, but he's not likely to seek revenge."*

Emotional reasoning: Concluding that something is true because it's what you feel in the moment.

Example of distortion: A senior executive who had successfully led many initiatives and received many awards at his previous organization felt unappreciated and unnoticed for the suggestions he was making in meetings at his new company. "*They just want me to shut up because I threaten them,*" he couldn't help thinking. "*They're too jealous to appreciate what I bring to the table."*

An alternative interpretation: In reality, most of his colleagues were just too busy or focused on their own ideas. There was no animosity toward him or his ideas, and many looked forward to working with him on new things. He might have realized this if he had challenged his initial reactions with thoughts like, "*I'm used to a different reaction, but that doesn't mean they don't like or appreciate me*" and "*I need to go ask a few people how they're actually perceiving my contributions.*" That's not always easy to do on your own — emotions have a way of hijacking our brains — but asking a trusted colleague to provide a reality check after meetings can help.

"Positive self-talk," another CBT technique, is also a powerful thing. It improves not only our effectiveness in giving and receiving feedback, but also how we respond to other stressful events and even to stress itself. Several studies have shown that seeing stress as debilitating versus performance-enhancing has a dramatically negative impact on how

people perform stressful activities. And our mindsets — which we, not others, control — contribute to long-term health outcomes. In short, like reframing our thoughts and responses, choosing to see candid feedback as productive and useful is likely to make us more effective at giving and receiving it.

Using these tools to press the "reset" button on our thoughts and feelings helps us gain perspective so we can see others' intentions and reactions for what they really are.

James R. Detert is a professor of business administration and the associate dean of Executive Degree Programs and Leadership Initiatives at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business.

Ethan R. Burris is an associate professor of management at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin.

This article is about GIVING FEEDBACK

⊕ Follow This Topic

Related Topics: Receiving Feedback | Psychology

Comments

3 COMMENTS

LEE DICKINSON 3 years ago

Common sense really. Feedback or feedforward so that a) we're all clear what needs to be done now, and b) that we might make better decisions going forward.

Reply 0 0

Join The Conversation

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.