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THREE TRIGGERS

That Block Feedback

Let's start with some good news. Not all feedback is difficult. Your son's teacher, astonishingly, praises his social skills. Your customer offers a clever suggestion about how to handle his order that expedites the process. You want bangs, but your hairdresser has a better idea, which is, actually, a better idea. We get this sort of feedback all the time. It helps or it doesn't, and either way we're not much bothered by it.

Most of us do just fine with positive feedback, although even praise can sometimes leave us uneasy. Perhaps we're not sure it's genuine or we fear we haven't earned it. But closing the deal, or learning that someone you admire admires you, or getting that perfect bit of coaching that kicks your skill level up a notch can be electrifying. We did it, it worked, someone likes us.

Then there's the tougher stuff—the feedback that leaves us confused or enraged, flustered or flattened. You're attacking *my* child, *my* career, *my* character? You're going to leave me off the team? Is that really what you think of me?

This kind of feedback triggers us: Our heart pounds, our stomach clenches, our thoughts race and scatter. We usually think of that surge of emotion as being "in the way"—a distraction to be brushed aside, an obstacle to overcome. After all, when we're in the grip of a triggered reaction we feel lousy, the world looks darker, and our usual communication skills slip just out of reach. We can't think, we can't learn, and so we defend, attack, or withdraw in defeat.

But pushing our triggered reactions aside or pretending they don't exist is not the answer. Trying to ignore a triggered reaction without

first identifying its cause is like dealing with a fire by disconnecting the smoke alarm.

So triggers are obstacles, but they aren't *only* obstacles. Triggers are also information—a kind of map—that can help us locate the source of the trouble. Understanding our triggers and sorting out what set them off are the keys to managing our reactions and engaging in feedback conversations with skill.

Let's take a closer look at that map.

THREE FEEDBACK TRIGGERS

Because feedback givers are abundant and our shortcomings seemingly boundless, we imagine that feedback can trigger us in a googolplex of ways. But here's more good news:

There are only three.

We call them "Truth Triggers," "Relationship Triggers," and "Identity Triggers." Each is set off for different reasons, and each provokes a different set of reactions and responses from us.

- **Truth Triggers** are set off by the substance of the feedback itself—it's somehow off, unhelpful, or simply untrue. In response, we feel indignant, wronged, and exasperated. Miriam experiences a truth trigger when her husband tells her she was "unfriendly and aloof" at his nephew's bar mitzvah. "Unfriendly? Was I supposed to get up on the table and tap dance?" This feedback is ridiculous. It is just plain wrong.
- **Relationship Triggers** are tripped by the particular person who is giving us this gift of feedback. All feedback is colored by the relationship between giver and receiver, and we can have reactions based on what we believe *about* the giver (they've got no credibility on this topic!) or how we feel *treated by* the giver (after all I've done for you, I get this kind of petty criticism?). Our focus shifts from the feedback itself to the audacity of the person delivering it (are they malicious or just stupid?).
- By contrast, **Identity Triggers** focus neither on the feedback nor on the person offering it. Identity triggers are all about *us*. Whether the

feedback is right or wrong, wise or witless, something about it has caused our identity—our sense of who we are—to come undone. We feel overwhelmed, threatened, ashamed, or off balance. We're suddenly unsure what to think about ourselves, and question what we stand for. When we're in this state, the past can look damning and the future bleak. That's the identity trigger talking, and once it gets tripped, a nuanced discussion of our strengths and weaknesses is not in the cards. We're just trying to survive.

Is there anything wrong with any of the reactions above? If the feedback is genuinely off target or the person giving it has proven untrustworthy, or we feel threatened and off balance, aren't these responses pretty reasonable?

They are.

Our triggered reactions are not obstacles because they are unreasonable. Our triggers are obstacles because they keep us from engaging skillfully in the conversation. Receiving feedback well is a process of sorting and filtering—of learning how the other person sees things; of trying on ideas that at first seem a poor fit; of experimenting. And of shelving or discarding the parts of the feedback that in the end seem off or not what you need right now.

And it's not just the receiver who learns. During an effective conversation, the feedback *giver* may come to see why their advice is unhelpful or their assessment unfair, and both parties may understand their relationship in a clarifying light. They each see how they are reacting to the other, showing a way forward that's more productive than what either imagined before.

But it's nearly impossible to do any of this from inside our triggers. And so we make mistakes that cause us to put potentially valuable feedback into the discard pile, or just as damaging, we take to heart feedback that is better left at the curb.

WHY WE GET TRIGGERED AND WHAT HELPS

Let's look more closely at each of the three triggers and get an overview of what we can do to manage them more effectively.

1. TRUTH TRIGGERS: THE FEEDBACK IS WRONG, UNFAIR, UNHELPFUL

There are lots of good reasons not to take feedback, and at the front of the line stands this one: it's wrong. The advice is bad, the evaluation is unjust, the perception someone has of us is outdated or incomplete. We reject, defend, or counterattack, sometimes in the conversation but always in our minds.

But understanding the feedback we get well enough to evaluate it fairly turns out to be much harder than it appears. Below are three reasons why and what helps.

Separate Appreciation, Coaching, and Evaluation

The first challenge in understanding feedback is that, surprisingly often, we don't know whether it *is* feedback, and if it is, we're not sure exactly what kind it is or how on earth it's supposed to help us. Yes, we did ask for feedback; no, we did not ask for whatever it is that they've just offered us.

Part of the problem is that the word "feedback" can mean a number of different things. A pat on the back is feedback, and so is a dressing-down. Helpful pointers are feedback, and so is getting voted off the island. These aren't just positive and negative; they're fundamentally different kinds of feedback, with entirely different purposes.

The very first task in assessing feedback is figuring out what kind of feedback we are dealing with. Broadly, feedback comes in three forms: appreciation (thanks), coaching (here's a better way to do it), and evaluation (here's where you stand). Often the receiver wants or hears one kind of feedback, while the giver actually means another. You finally show your professional artist friend the self-portrait you painted. At this stage of your development, what you need is a little encouragement, something along the lines of "Hey, cool. Keep working at it." What you get instead is a list of twelve things you need to fix.

We can flip this story. You showed your work to your professional artist friend because you were hoping for a list of twelve things to fix,

and instead get a "Hey, cool. Keep working at it." How is that going to help you get better?

Know what you want, and know what you're getting. The match matters.

First Understand

Sounds obvious, seems easy: Before you figure out what to do with the feedback, make sure you understand it. Like us, you probably think you're doing this already. You listen to the feedback. You accept it or you reject it. But in the context of receiving feedback, "understanding" what the other person means—what they see, what they're worried about, what they're recommending—is not so easy. In fact, it's flat-out hard.

Consider Kip and Nancy. They work for an organization that recruits talent for sought-after jobs overseas. Nancy tells Kip that he seems biased against candidates with nontraditional backgrounds. Nancy says that his bias is "seeping through" during interviews.

At first, Kip dismisses this feedback. His bias does not "seep through" because he does not have a bias. In fact, although Nancy is unaware of it, Kip himself has a nontraditional background, and if anything, he worries that he tends to favor candidates who've had the initiative to chart their own course in life.

So as far as Kip can tell, this feedback is simply wrong. Are we suggesting that he should accept it as right, nonetheless? No. We're saying that Kip doesn't yet know what the feedback actually *means*. The first step is for him to work harder to understand exactly what Nancy sees that is causing concern.

Kip eventually asks Nancy to clarify her feedback, and she explains: "When you interview traditional candidates, you describe common challenges the job presents, and observe how they reason through it. With nontraditional candidates, you don't discuss the job. You just shoot the breeze about the candidate's coffee cart business or travels with the merchant marine. You're not taking them seriously."

Kip is starting to understand and offers Nancy his view in response:

"In my mind, I'm taking them very seriously. I'm listening for their persistence and resourcefulness—critical skills for demanding overseas jobs with unclear boundaries and harsh conditions. That's better than presenting some hypothetical challenge."

Following the guideline to *first understand,* Kip is getting a sense of where Nancy is coming from and Nancy is getting a sense of Kip's perspective. A good start, but as we'll see below, there's still a ways to go.

See Your Blind Spots

Complicating our desire to understand feedback is the matter of blind spots. Of course, *you* don't have blind spots, but you know that your colleagues, family, and friends certainly do. That's the nature of blind spots. We're not only blind to certain things about ourselves; we're also blind to the fact that we're blind. Yet, gallingly, our blind spots are glaringly obvious to everybody else.

This is a key cause for confusion in feedback conversations. Sometimes feedback that we know is wrong really is wrong. And sometimes, it's just feedback in our blind spot.

Let's come back to Kip and Nancy. Nancy sees something important that Kip can't: Kip. She watches and hears Kip when he is conducting interviews. She's noticed that Kip is more animated when he interviews nontraditional candidates; he talks louder and interrupts more often, giving them less space—and sometimes almost no space—to make their case.

Kip is so surprised by this observation that he can barely believe it's true. He simply was not aware he was doing that. And he's dismayed: If what Nancy is saying is right, then despite his good intentions, he might actually be disadvantaging the candidates that he is most excited to talk to. His slight bias in favor of these nontraditional candidates is actually working against them.

So Kip and Nancy have each learned something from their conversation. Nancy understands Kip's intentions in a more generous light, and Kip is starting to get a handle on how his behavior is actually affecting the interviews. The conversation isn't over, but they are in a better place to straighten things out.

Managing truth triggers is not about pretending there's something to learn, or saying you think it's right if you think it's wrong. It's about recognizing that it's always more complicated than it appears and working hard to first understand. And even if you decide that 90 percent of the feedback is off target, that last golden 10 percent might be just the insight you need to grow.

2. RELATIONSHIP TRIGGERS: I CAN'T HEAR THIS FEEDBACK FROM *YOU*

Our perception of feedback is inevitably influenced (and sometimes tainted) by who is giving it to us. We can be triggered by something about the giver—their (lack of) credibility, (un)trustworthiness, or (questionable) motives. We can likewise be triggered by how we feel treated by that person. Do they appreciate us? Are they delivering the feedback in a respectful manner (by e-mail? Are you kidding?). Are they blaming us when the real problem is them? Our twenty years of simmering history together can intensify our reaction, but interestingly, relationship triggers can get tripped even when we have only twenty seconds of relationship history at this red light.

Don't Switchtrack: Disentangle What from Who

Relationship triggers produce hurt, suspicion, and sometimes anger. The way out is to disentangle the feedback from the relationship issues it triggers, and to discuss both, clearly and separately.

In practice, we almost never do this. Instead, as receivers, we take up the relationship issues and let the original feedback drop. From the point of view of the person giving us the feedback, we have completely changed the topic—from their feedback to us ("be on time") to our feedback to them ("don't talk to me that way"). The topic of "who" defeats the topic of "what" and the original feedback is blocked. We call this dynamic Switchtracking.

Let's come back to Miriam at the bar mitzvah. In addition to experiencing a truth trigger, Miriam also endures a relationship trigger. When her husband, Sam, accuses her of being aloof, she feels unappreciated and hurt, and so she switchtracks: "Do you have any idea

what I went through just to get to that bar mitzvah? I rearranged Mom's dialysis and got Matilda bathed and dressed so she'd look presentable at the party for *your* nephew, the one whose name you can't even remember."

Miriam raises important concerns about appreciation and division of chores, but she is effectively changing the topic from Sam's feedback about her unfriendliness to her feelings about Sam's lack of appreciation. If Sam is genuinely troubled that Miriam is not treating his family as warmly as he'd like, that's an important conversation to have—as is the conversation about Miriam's feeling underappreciated. But they are two different topics, and should be two different conversations.

Trying to talk about both topics simultaneously is like mixing your apple pie and your lasagna into one pan and throwing it in the oven. No matter how long you bake it, it's going to come out a mess.

Identify the Relationship System

The first kind of relationship trigger comes from our reaction to the other person: I don't like how I am being treated, or I don't trust your judgment. We can have these reactions even when the feedback itself has nothing to do with the relationship. You might be teaching me how to hit a tennis ball or balance a checkbook.

But often, feedback is not only happening in the context of a relationship; it's created by the relationship itself. Embedded in the hurly-burly of every relationship is a unique pairing of sensitivities, preferences, and personalities. It is the nature of our particular pairing—rather than either of us individually—that creates friction. The giver is telling us that we need to change, and in response we think: "You think the problem is *me*? That's hilarious, because the problem is very obviously *you*." The problem is not that I am *over*sensitive; it's that you are *in*sensitive.

Another example: You set aggressive revenue targets to motivate me. But they don't motivate me; they discourage me. When I come up short, your fix is to set even higher targets to "light a fire under me." Now I feel *more* hopeless. We each point our finger at the other, but neither of us is putting our finger on the problem. Neither of us sees

that we are both caught in a reinforcing loop of this two-person system and that we are each doing things that perpetuate it.

So feedback in relationships is rarely the story of you *or* me. It's more often the story of you *and* me. It's the story of our relationship system.

When they blame you, and it feels unfair, blaming them back is not the answer. To them, *that* will seem unfair, and worse, they'll assume you're making excuses. Instead, work to understand it this way: "What's the dynamic between us and what are we each contributing to the problem?"

3. IDENTITY TRIGGERS: THE FEEDBACK IS THREATENING AND I'M OFF BALANCE

Identity is the story we tell ourselves about who we are and what the future holds for us, and when critical feedback is incoming, that story is under attack. Our security alarm sounds, the brain's defense mechanisms kick in, and before the giver gets out their second sentence we're gearing up to counterattack or pass out. Our response can range from a minor adrenaline jolt to profound destabilization.

Learn How Wiring and Temperament Affect Your Story

Not everyone shuts down in the same way, in response to the same things, or for the same amount of time. This is the first challenge of understanding identity triggers: At a purely biological level, we're all wired differently and we each respond in our own way to stressful information, just as we each respond in our own way to roller-coaster rides. Raissa can't wait to get on the roller coaster for a second and third time; Elaine feels that that one ride may have ruined the entire rest of her life. Understanding the common wiring patterns as well as your own temperament gives you insight into why you react as you do, and helps explain why others don't react the way you expect them to.

Dismantle Distortions

Consider Laila. Whether due to wiring, life experience, or both, she is highly sensitive to feedback. Whatever the feedback is, she distorts

and magnifies it. She's not responding to the words of the giver; she's responding to her distorted perception of those words.

When her boss comments that she'll need to be "on her game" at tomorrow's meeting, she wonders whose game her boss thinks she's been on up to now. *Does he think I don't know what I'm doing? Does he think I don't understand the importance of the meeting?* She recalls other interactions she's had with him and starts to question whether he's ever had any confidence in her and, given what a screwup she is, whether he even should. Fifteen years of past mistakes come flooding to the fore. She doesn't sleep that night, and is a mess during the meeting.

Luckily for Laila (and the rest of us), it is possible to learn to keep feedback in perspective, even when doing so doesn't come naturally. Laila needs to become aware of the ways she typically distorts feedback and the patterns her mind follows. Once aware, she can begin systematically to dismantle those distortions. That in turn helps her to regain her balance and allows her to engage with and learn from the feedback.

Cultivate a Growth Identity

In addition to her tendency to distort the feedback, Laila has a mindset challenge: She sees the world as one big test. Every day at work is a test, every meeting is a test, every interaction with a boss or friend is a test. And every instance of feedback is a test result, a verdict. So even when someone offers her coaching or encouragement—"be on your game tomorrow!"—she hears it as a damning assessment that she's not.

Research conducted at Stanford points to two very different ways people tell their identity story and the effect that can have on how we experience criticism, challenge, and failure. One identity story assumes our traits are "fixed": Whether we are capable or bumbling, lovable or difficult, smart or dull, we aren't going to change. Hard work and practice won't help; we are as we are. Feedback reveals "how we are," so there's a lot at stake.

Those who handle feedback more fruitfully have an identity story with a different assumption at its core. These folks see themselves as ever evolving, ever growing. They have what is called a "growth"

Triggered Reaction	Learning Response
TRUTH	
That's wrong. That's not helpful. That's not me.	Separate Appreciation, Coaching, and Evaluation We need all three, but mixing them puts us at cross-purposes. First Understand: Shift from "That's Wrong" to "Tell Me More" Feedback labels are vague and confusing. The giver has information we don't (and vice versa). We each interpret things differently. See Your Blind Spots: Discover How You Come Across We can't see ourselves or hear our tone of voice. We need others to help us see ourselves, and our impact on those around us.
RELATIONSHIP	
After all I've done for you? Who are you to say? You're the problem, not me	Don't Switchtrack: Separate We from What Talk about both the feedback and the relationship issues. Identify the Relationship System: Take Three Steps Back Step back to see the relationship system between giver and receiver, and the ways you are each contributing to the problems that are prompting you to exchange feedback.
IDENTITY	
I screw up everything. I'm doomed. I'm not a bad person—or am I?	Learn How Wiring Affects How We Hear Feedback Individuals vary widely in our reactions to positive and negative feedback; extreme reactions color our sense of ourselves and our future. Dismantle Distortions: See Feedback at "Actual Size" Work to correct distorted thinking and regain balance. Cultivate a Growth Identity: Sort toward Coaching We are always learning and growing. Challenge is the fastest track to growth, especially if we can sort toward coaching.

identity. How they are now is simply how they are *now*. It's a pencil sketch of a moment in time, not a portrait in oil and gilded frame. Hard work matters; challenge and even failure are the best ways to learn and improve. Inside a growth identity, feedback is valuable information about where one stands now and what to work on next. It is welcome input rather than upsetting verdict.

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In chapters 2 through 9, we take a closer look at each of our triggers, the way they trip us up, and key strategies for handling them more productively. In chapters 10 and 11 we turn to the question of when it's okay to turn down feedback and how to handle the feedback conversation itself. In chapter 12 we offer a handful of powerful ideas for testing out feedback and getting quick traction on growth.

Finally, in chapter 13, we look at feedback in groups, and present ideas for creating pull in organizations. When it comes to our teams, our families, our firms, and our communities, we really are in it together. We can generate pull within our organizations and our teams by inspiring individuals to drive their own learning and seek out surprises and opportunities for growth. And we can help each other to stay balanced along the way.

While names have been changed, the stories are based on the experiences of real people. We hope you recognize yourself at times, feel reassured always, and come to see that you are not alone in the struggle.