HOW TO RECEIVE FEEDBACK

IS FEEDBACK REALLY A GIFT?

You've probably heard people say that feedback is a gift. If that's the case, you might wonder, why does it so often feel like a kick in the teeth?

Partly it's because the people who give us feedback aren't always skilled at it. Something about their timing, or language, or approach leaves us feeling defensive. Lamentably, our feedback providers' skill at giving feedback is not within our control. What *is* within our control is how we receive the feedback that is given to us.

This document, based on the work of Doug Stone and Sheila Heen of Harvard Law School and the Harvard Program on Negotiation, provides a framework you can use to get the most out of feedback – regardless of the skill of the person delivering it. The framework is built on four key strategies[1] for receiving feedback:

- Cultivate a growth identity
- Understand the feedback
- Evaluate the feedback
- Take action

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I.   CULTIVATE A GROWTH IDENTITY

Stone and Heen cite research conducted at Stanford University that suggests that our "identities" affect how we respond to feedback. Some of us have fixed identities. Like Popeye, we believe that, "I am what I am." We don't believe there is a lot we can do to change who we are or how we behave. For those of us with fixed identities, feedback about how to improve can feel like an attack on who we are.

Others of us have what Stone and Heen call "growth identities."   We see ourselves as constantly evolving and changing. Feedback is not a comment on *who we are*; it's a comment on *where we are* now and where we might want to focus to grow further.

If you can cultivate a growth identity, feedback will feel more like a gift and less like a kick in the teeth.

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[1] To learn more about how to receive feedback, read Stone & Heen's *Thanks for the Feedback*, Viking Press, 2014.

II. UNDERSTAND THE FEEDBACK

A. *Record the Feedback*

Use the space below to write down the feedback you received. (The block will expand to accommodate the amount of text you write.)

B. *Identify Type of Feedback*

What type of feedback did you receive?	☐Appreciation	☐Coaching	☐Evaluation
What type of feedback did you want?	☐Appreciation	☐Coaching	☐Evaluation

C. *Dig beneath the Labels*

Feedback is often provided in the form of subjective labels like, "You're *outstanding*," or "You're not a *team player*." It's difficult to respond effectively to feedback that consists only of labels because a given label can mean different things to different people. You'll be able to process your feedback more effectively if you dig beneath the labels you hear to understand three things:

- *What past behavior or results on your part does the label refer to?* If your boss tells you that you aren't a team player, is she referring to the fact that you haven't signed up for as many training classes as your colleagues? Or that you took vacation during the department's busy time? Or that your last three projects have come in late? If your boss doesn't tell you, you need to ask her. If you don't ask, you risk responding to the feedback you *think* she sent rather than to the feedback she *intended* to send.

- *What future behavior and results is your feedback provider requesting?* Even when feedback describes your past behavior, there is usually an implied request that you replace your old behavior with a different, new behavior. It's important to understand what future behavior is being requested. Continuing the example above, is your boss looking for you to take more training classes? To refrain from asking for vacation during busy season? To deliver all your projects on time? All of these? You need to understand what she is requesting in order to understand the feedback.

- *What consequences can you expect?* What will be the consequences if you make the requested (or implied) changes to your behavior? What will be the consequences if you don't make these changes?

Use the space below to unpack the labels in your feedback. (You can make space for additional labels by placing your cursor in the bottom right-hand cell and hitting the Tab key.)

Label	Past behavior or performance on your part that underlies the label	Future behavior or performance on your part that is being requested	Expected consequences to you of complying and of not complying with the request
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			

D. Understand the Relationship System

The Relationship System is the system in which you and your feedback provider interact. Three important pieces of the Relationship System are style differences, role differences, and the bigger picture. If you can understand these three pieces of the Relationship System, the feedback you receive will feel less like a personal attack and it will be easier for you to find something of value in it.

Style differences. Sometimes we receive feedback that feels like a personal attack but is really a reflection of the difference between our work style and the work style of our feedback provider. When a colleague gives us label feedback like, "You need to be more organized," what he may really mean is, "I like to have a project plan that clearly spells out who is responsible for what. You tend to figure it out as you go along and I feel nervous when you do that. I'd feel better if you created a project plan." That sounds less critical than "You need to be more organized." But not all feedback providers are skilled enough to present feedback in this way. If your colleague isn't quite that skilled, it's up to you to identify the differences in your work styles that may be behind the feedback. You can explore together how to address the gap.

Role differences. Our organizational roles often lead us to behave in certain ways and to give certain types of feedback. Consider Gloria, a cost accountant, and Rick, an account manager who is wooing a new client over lavish dinners. No one will be surprised if Gloria suggests to Rick that he needs to rein in his spending, or if Rick asks Gloria to stop "hounding" him about his expenses. A certain amount of conflict is inherent in their roles: Rick is rewarded primarily for bringing in new business and Gloria is rewarded primarily for keeping costs down.   If Rick and Gloria understand the inherent conflict in their roles, it may help them to be more responsive to one another's requests and less likely to accuse one another of being unreasonable.

The bigger picture. The "bigger picture" in which we interact with our feedback provider includes other players as well as company processes, policies, procedures and structures. Gloria's request that Rick rein in his expenses might make more sense to Rick if knew that:

- Gloria's boss (another player) has tasked her with cutting client entertainment expenses by 15% or that

- Gloria's bonus is dependent on her success at this task (policy)

Rick's request that Gloria stop "hounding him" might be easier for Gloria to understand if she realized that:

- Rick' boss (another player) directed him "not to skimp" on entertaining this prospect because the account has the potential to bring in twice the revenue generated by the firm's largest client
- It's difficult for Rick to track his entertainment expenses on this client because the reports he receives from Gloria's department (procedure) show a single line item for client entertainment expense; they don't provide line items for the eight different prospects he is courting.

Use the space below to describe the Relationship System Elements that may be playing a role in the feedback you received.
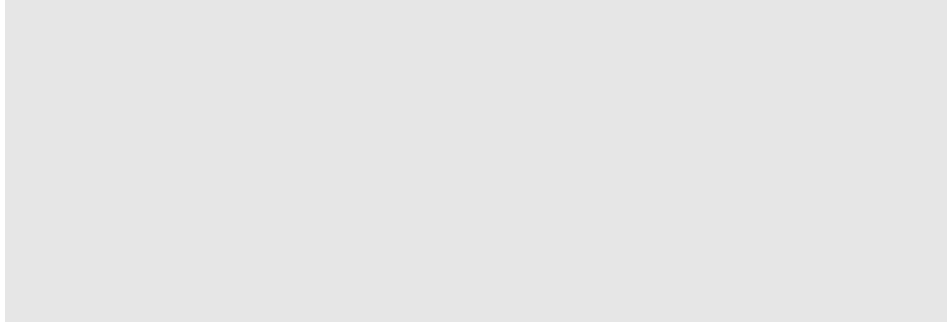
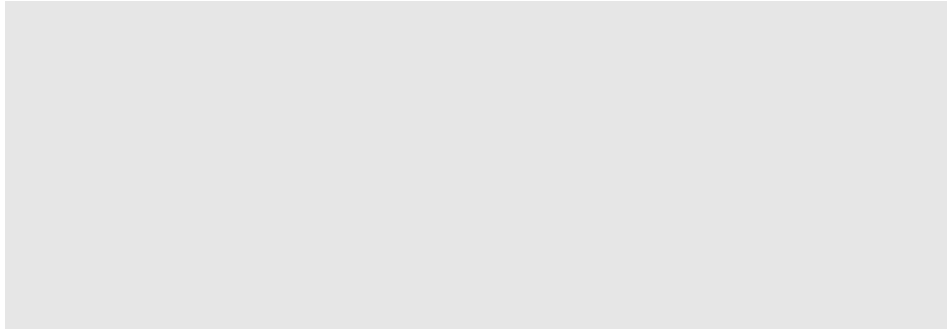| Relationship System Element Explained	Relationship System Element in Your Feedback
Work style differences. The work style differences between you and your feedback provider that may be driving the feedback you have received	
Role differences. How the roles you each play in the organization may be creating natural conflict between the two of you	
Bigger picture. How elements beyond the two of you—things like other players and company processes, policies, procedures and structures may be contributing to the feedback you are receiving	

III. EVALUATE THE FEEDBACK

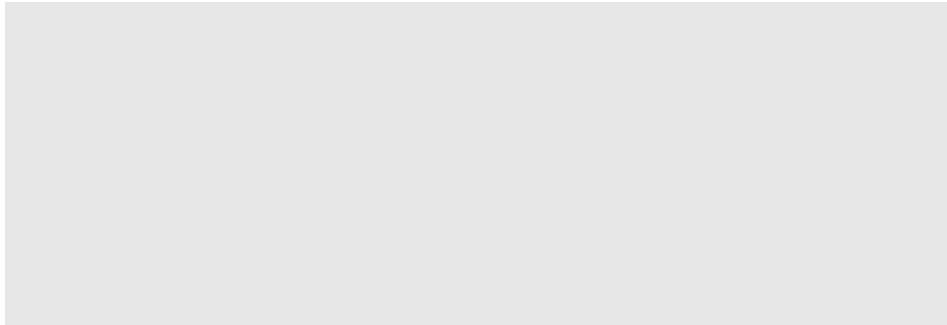Now that you understand the feedback, it's time to evaluate it.
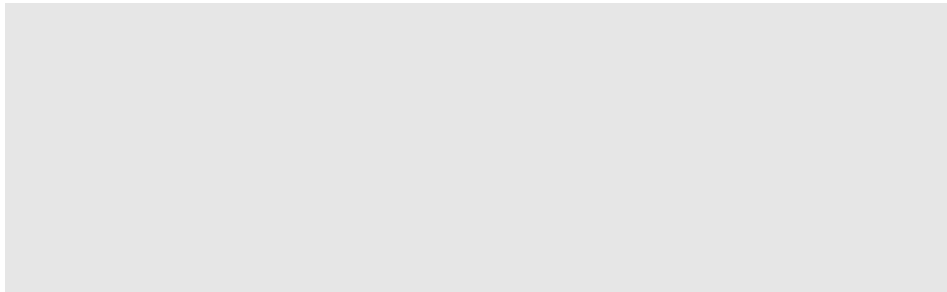
A. What's wrong about the feedback?

B. What might be right about the feedback?

C. What is this feedback really about?

D. What is this feedback NOT about?

IV. TAKE ACTION

After you've understood and evaluated the feedback, decide how you will respond to it by answering the following questions.

A. What might I learn from this feedback?

B. What might I do to respond to this feedback?

C. Which of the action items above do I commit to doing?