Suggestions for Feedback Receivers

A. Separate appreciation, evaluation, and coaching - It can be disappointing if your principal says, “Nice job” after observing you when you wanted more critical feedback. As the receiver, try specifying if you don’t get what you want, “Thank you for the appreciation, but I was hoping you might provide me with more of a critique.”

B. Seek to understand the feedback itself - If feedback is vague, ask to clarify, “Can you tell me what you observed that makes you say that? “Or “So, what specifically do you think I should change to improve?” Sometimes the feedback giver has different information or a different interpretation, so try to get this view, “My understanding was that my class was deeply engaged. What makes you say the students were off task?”

C. Don’t switchtrack, give each topic its own track - When there is an issue with the feedback giver, we often change our focus from the content of the feedback to the problems we have with the giver. Instead, separate the two issues. For example, Ella, a TA who has put a lot of effort into her students with disabilities feels she never gets feedback from the head teacher. Eight months into the year, the teacher says, “You’re spending too much time focusing on Howard.” Ella silently switchtracks as she thinks, Have you noticed what I put into this job and what I mean to these kids? Before she says anything, she catches herself, Oh, there are two topics here. My interactions with Howard AND how I feel unappreciated. Here is what she could say to the teacher, “Let’s talk about how I am spending my time with Howard now because that’s important. This is also the first time I’ve gotten feedback, so after we talk about Howard, I would like to talk about how I get feedback and what you notice about my work with the kids that is positive.”

D. Understand your wiring - Look at the ways wiring impacts how you receive feedback and ask yourself, “How do I typically react to feedback?” Then you will be more prepared to respond to feedback in the moment.

Baseline: Where You Start – Of course our life experiences affect our mood – such as winning the lottery or losing a job – but each of us generally returns to our own individual level of well-being. This is why Uncle Murray seems perpetually annoyed and Aunt Eileen is amused by everything in life. Those with a higher baseline of happiness respond more positively to feedback than those with lower baselines. Don’t fret: if your baseline is lower, there are things you can do. For now, start by becoming aware of your baseline.

Swing: How Far Up or Down You Go – Some of us swing much higher up and down from our baseline level of happiness. These tend to be “highly reactive” people and they are more sensitive to negative feedback. For example, when a client sends the same

critical feedback to two people, the one with the bigger swing might respond with frantic anxiety while the lower-reactive one might

say, “Well, this means a bit more work now.”

Sustain and Recovery: How Long Does the Swing Last? – In addition to emotional swing, the other aspect of how you respond has to do with duration. How long does it take you to return to your baseline when you receive distressful feedback? Do you recover in minutes, days, weeks, or months? MRIs reveal that people who return to their baseline more quickly have more activity and

connections in the prefrontal cortex and amygdala. Their wiring is actually different from those who recover more slowly. The advantage

of recovering quickly is that you address the feedback rather than settling in to depression. In addition to recovery, how

long we sustain positive feelings affects our well-being. There is a cycle in the brain in which positive experiences trigger a dopamine

response, which triggers more positive experiences, which again, triggers more dopamine. There are things you can do to influence

this cycle to help you sustain positive feelings for longer. For example, when you need a reminder you are doing something right,

reread that positive feedback from your child’s teacher or the grateful client.

E. Wiring is Only Part of the Story: Emotions Distort Feedback Too - Wiring, however, is not destiny. While genetics clearly influences our temperament, neuroplasticity shows that wiring can change over time. Practices such as exercise, helping others, and meditation (see The Main Idea’s summary of The Mindful School Leader) can help raise your baseline over time. Further, research shows there is a 50-40-10 formula for our happiness. That is, 50 percent is inherited, 40 percent comes from how we interpret what happens, and the final 10 percent is attributed to our life circumstances – where we live, our health, etc. It’s within that 40 percent that we have a lot of room to grow. How we interpret what happens to us and the stories we tell about ourselves are malleable. However, we need to be aware that our emotions, not just our thoughts, have a large impact on how we respond to what happens. Below are three common ways that emotions, triggered particularly by negative feedback, distort our thinking about the past, present, and future.

Dismantle distortions - Contain the feedback by separating the content of the feedback from your feelings. Take the time to write down: 1) What you feel, 2) What the actual feedback is about. Or, create fill in the prompts like the example below:

What the feedback IS about: Whether I incorporated rigor into this class well. What the feedback is NOT about: Whether I teach low-level lessons in general or whether I’ll ever challenge my students.

Cultivate a growth identify - To ensure that you learn from feedback, give yourself a “second score.” Rate yourself on how well you responded to the first round of feedback. If you received a low rating or lots of critical feedback from your principal, would you give yourself a D for how you responded (“He never taught science so he doesn’t know what he’s talking about!”) or would you give yourself an A (“Wow, I didn’t realize I wasn’t checking for understanding. I’d like to observe Gaby because she’s great at this.”)

Experiment with solutions for handling feedback triggers - Have teachers practice ways to deal with triggers during the PD session. You can create examples of feedback and have teachers practice responding OR, have the write down how thy might respond.

Stone, D. & Heen, S. (2014). *Thanks for the feedback, The science and art of receiving feedback well.* London: Penguin Books

