

Three Triggers That Block Feedback

1. Truth Triggers – The content of the feedback is wrong, unfair, or unhelpful

We get triggered when we feel the *content* of the feedback is off base. A husband tells his wife that she was unfriendly and aloof at his nephew's bar mitzvah. Her reaction? *That's ridiculous and just plain wrong. I was plenty friendly.*

I. SEE THE TYPE OF FEEDBACK: Separate appreciation, coaching, and evaluation

There are three types of feedback, and it helps to have clarity on which one you are getting in a particular situation.

Understand the TYPE of Feedback: The Three Kinds of Feedback

1) *Appreciation* – When your boss says he is grateful you are on his team, he is expressing appreciation. Not only does this convey “thanks,” but it shows that he *sees* you and knows how hard you have been working. While appreciation might seem to be the fluffiest of the types of feedback, *without it*, good coaching is unlikely to be effective because the receiver is often listening for a compliment.

2) *Coaching* – Coaching accelerates our learning. It tells us where to focus our time and energy. It aims to help us learn, grow, or change. However, even when people on both sides of the coaching relationship – the giver and the givee – are well-meaning, coaching can be very complicated. The ideas in this book help people overcome these challenges.

3) *Evaluation* – Evaluation is used to rank, assess, or rate you. It's what tells you where you stand. Anything from your performance review to your middle school report card or your time in the 5k serves as evaluation. Evaluations compare you to others or to a standard, and there may be important implications of this – such as whether you get a year-end bonus or your time qualifies you for a swimming competition. While that might sound extreme, when we *don't* receive evaluation, we end up trying to use coaching or appreciation to try to figure out where we stand.

II. SEE WHAT THE GIVER MEANS: First understand

Irwin, a supervising attorney in the public defender's office, tells a new hire, Holly, that she's too involved with the personal lives of her clients and she should maintain an appropriate professional distance. Holly leans in and says, “Look, I grew up on these streets. I know what it means to have someone in your corner really fighting for you.” Does she fully understand the *content* of the feedback?

Understand the Specifics of the Feedback

1) *Feedback is Vague* – Feedback is often generic, “Don't be so selfish,” “Act your age,” or “You need boundaries.” If you know more specifically what someone wants you to change you would be in a better position to decide if you want to.

2) *Giver and Receiver Have Different Interpretations* – When I am the feedback giver, I have a clear movie in my mind showing what I mean. However, I forget that when I pass along the feedback, I don't attach the movie. There is often a mismatch between what is heard and what is meant. For example, someone says, “You've received a 4 out of 5 this year.” The receiver hears, “Last year I got a 4 and I worked much harder this year and got another 4. Hard work isn't noticed.” The giver meant, “No one gets a 5. Few even get a 4 and you got it twice! You are doing outstanding work.”

3) *It is Unclear Where Feedback Comes From or Where it is Going* – All feedback has both a past (“here's what I noticed”) and a future (“here's what you need to do”). However, vague feedback often leaves out both. For example, you say I'm a reckless driver. Well, where does this *come from*? The fact that I always talk to you on my cell when driving or the accident I had last year? And where is the feedback *going* – do you want me to wear my glasses at night or slow down? Also, most people jump to interpretation when giving feedback. Instead of saying, “I heard you say you were too busy to help,” the boss jumps to, “You're not a team player.”

III. SEE YOURSELF CLEARLY: Learn about your blind spots

- *Zoe thinks she's supportive of new ideas, but is always the first to shoot down a creative suggestion.*
- *Jules keeps talking long after you've signaled you need to go. Sometimes even after you've left.*

Is it possible that we are this unaware of our own shortcomings? Yes, there's often a gap between self-perception and others' ideas about us – our blind spots. Although we often start with good intentions, beneath those intentions are often other deeper feelings that may “leak through” and clue others into our true feelings. Below are some ways we inadvertently convey those inner feelings.

Ways We Are Blind to Ourselves

- 1) *Your Leaky Face* – People are very good at reading each other's faces.
- 2) *Your Leaky Tone* – People hear not just from *what* we say, but *how* we say it. Unfortunately we can't hear our tone so well.
- 3) *Your Leaky Patterns* – Bennett watches his five-year-old son mimic a person barking into a pretend cell phone. His daughter yells, “That's you, Daddy!” Bennett tries to minimize cell phone use around the kids and asks, “How is that *me*?”
- 4) *E-Mail Body Language* – People even read meaning into e-mail messages. Believe it or not, your word choice, timing, who you cc, the length of your message, and more, all convey information about your mood and intentions.

2. Relationship Triggers – I can't hear this feedback from *YOU*

It seems like it shouldn't matter *who* is giving us feedback, it's the *content* that matters, right? But it really does matter. It is often the *person* who is giving us the feedback that triggers us more than the feedback itself.

Two Relationship Triggers

1) *What We Think About Them* – When there are people we don't trust or who lack credibility, it just doesn't matter what their feedback is. We discard the *what* based on the *who*. Below are three common cases of this:

(a) **Skill or Judgment** – We often discredit feedback when it seems that the giver lacks judgment in *how*, *when*, or *where* they give the feedback. For example, “Why would you say that in front of my husband?” or “You waited until now to bring this up?”

(b) **Credibility** – Another reason we reject feedback is because of the giver's lack of credibility, “He has never started a business” or “She has never coached soccer.” Background *is* important, but there may be something right about the feedback.

(c) **Trust** – We also avoid feedback when we believe the giver doesn't have our best interests at heart. However, even if a person is crazy, jealous, or downright mean, the feedback itself could be dead on.

2) *How We Feel Treated By Them* – We may react poorly to feedback because of how we feel treated *by them*. This often happens as a result of feeling a lack of appreciation, autonomy, or acceptance.

(a) **Appreciation** – Ernie covers for Samantha so she can take time off of work, but when she returns, the first thing she does is to question why Ernie failed to call a client back. He says, “What is wrong with you?” because he feels underappreciated.

(b) **Autonomy** – We often feel triggered when people take away our autonomy. Your boss does not get to give you feedback on *your* e-mail to *your* team before you send it out. We can't hear the advice because we are too focused on being told what to do.

(c) **Acceptance** – If we feel people don't accept us for who we are, we find it hard to take their feedback. *Nothing I do is ever good enough for my boss*. Of course we all need to be accepted for who we are, but we also need to hear feedback about who we are.

3. Identity Triggers – The feedback threatens who *I AM*

This third type of trigger is not about the content of the feedback *or* the person giving it. Instead, it is about *us*. It makes us question our identity, the story we tell ourselves about who we are. We become threatened or ashamed and end up defensive and off-balance.

Three Ways We are Wired Differently

Krista and Alita respond differently to feedback. When Alita, a popular obstetrician, received glowing reviews from most patients except for a few who mentioned they sometimes had to wait, Alita responded with, “I was so disheartened.” In contrast, Krista says this about feedback, “When I hear someone doesn't like something I did, I immediately think, *Really? But do you know how amazing I am?*” One reason they respond differently is due to their wiring – the ways their neural structures and connections are built. We are all built differently and have different tendencies. If people have often told you that you are “hypersensitive” or “totally oblivious,” this may be the way you are built. You may respond differently to feedback because of your: *baseline*, *swing*, and *sustain and recovery*.

1. *Baseline: Where You Start* – Of course winning the lottery or losing a job affects our mood, 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. 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.

2. *Swing: How Far Up or Down You Go* – Some of us swing much higher up and down from our baseline level of happiness. “Highly reactive” people tend to be more sensitive to negative feedback. For example, a client sends the same critical feedback to two people, but the one with the bigger swing responds with anxiety while the lower-reactive one says, “Well, this means a bit more work now.”

3. *Sustain and Recovery: How Long Does the Swing Last?* – 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 days, weeks, or months?

Wiring is Only Part of the Story: Emotions Distort Feedback, Too

In addition to genetics, our *emotions* also have a large impact on how we respond to feedback. Below are three common ways that emotions, triggered particularly by negative feedback, distort our thinking about the past, present, and future.

1. *Our Past: We've Never Done Anything Right* – When we get upsetting feedback about *today* it influences the story we tell ourselves about yesterday. Someone gives you feedback about one bad choice you just made and suddenly all you can think about are *all the poor choices* you've ever made. You can't even recall one example of a good choice you've made.

2. *Our Present: Not One Thing, Everything* – Someone tells you just sang a song off key, and you think, *I sing off key? I can't do anything right*. Rushing to this generalization prevents you from hearing the feedback – that you sang *one* particular song off key.

3. *Our Future: The Forever Bias* – Emotions also affect how you imagine the future. “You had mayonnaise on your cheek during the date,” becomes, “I will die alone.” This seems like an obvious distortion, but to the feedback receiver, the conclusion is very real.

Our Mindsets Affects How We Receive Feedback, Too – It's no surprise that those with a growth mindset react more favorably and productively to feedback than those with a fixed mindset.