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## **ARTICLE** **DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH**

# A Subordinate's Criticism Makes You More Creative

*An Interview with Yeun Joon Kim by Amy Meeker*



**Yeun Joon Kim** of the University of Cambridge and **Junha Kim** of the Ohio State University conducted a field experiment at a Korean health-food company in which they assessed the top-down, bottom-up, and lateral feedback that product developers received during quarterly performance evaluations. Two months later they examined how each person's supervisor rated his or her creativity in the intervening time. They found that people reviewed negatively by a manager or a peer showed low levels of creativity—but for managers critiqued by a lower-ranking employee, the opposite was true. **Their conclusion:**

# A Subordinate's Criticism Makes You More Creative



## Professor Yeun Joon Kim, DEFEND YOUR RESEARCH

**YEUN JOON KIM:** People typically respond to negative feedback in one of two ways: They may feel threatened, become reluctant to experiment, and get distracted from their work. Or they may identify problems with their current performance and implement better strategies for getting things done.

Which way people react depends on where the feedback came from. When employees are criticized by a boss or a peer, they tend to feel threatened. But when leaders are criticized by followers—employees they manage—they're more likely to focus on getting better at their tasks.

**HBR: Why would managers be OK having underlings point out their weaknesses? Surely that's a blow to the ego.** It's all about the power dynamic. When employees get negative feedback from a higher-up, it affects their self-image and makes them anxious about their future, because bosses hold all the cards—they evaluate employees and determine their promotions and pay. Criticism from a peer, too, will probably create some insecurity; after all, colleagues often compete for the same resources and opportunities, so negative feedback can feel like a power play—an attempt to denigrate someone's abilities and an attack on self-esteem. When a manager is criticized by an employee, it feels less threatening because the employee doesn't have any control over the boss's resources and rewards.

**How big was the managers' creativity bump?** After getting negative feedback from subordinates, the managers' creativity rose, on average, by about 9%, according to reviews from supervisors.

**Could it be that because the managers were older and more experienced, they had thicker skins and were better able to handle criticism?** If that were the case, the positive relationship between criticism and creativity should have been stronger for older managers and managers with longer tenures. We tested for both things but didn't find any such effect.

**Were the results the same for male and female managers?** I get asked that question a lot! We looked at that, too, but didn't see any differences.

**What if a boss is new to the role or incompetent—or, even worse, really insecure? Would you still expect negative feedback from a subordinate to have this beneficial effect?** We couldn't control for personality differences, so our data can't answer

that question. But my gut feeling is that if a boss has high levels of neuroticism, he or she will probably feel really threatened, and that could hurt performance on creative tasks.

**The employees you studied worked for a Korean company. Could cultural norms have influenced the results?**

We were concerned about that. In Korea shame and power are salient cultural factors; no one is likely to think that an employee could possibly threaten a manager, so bosses might find it pretty easy to take criticism from subordinates. So we conducted a second study, this time with undergraduate students at a North American university. We assigned participants to the role of manager, subordinate, or peer and told them they would be getting feedback from other participants in those roles—but in fact we manipulated the comments they got and the directions they thought the comments came from. We then asked participants to come up with creative ideas about organizational issues and had independent judges evaluate the results. We found exactly the same pattern we'd seen in the Korean firm: When people got negative feedback and believed it had come from a manager or a peer, they felt threatened and their creativity suffered. When they believed the criticism had come from a subordinate, their creativity increased.

**I have a fantastic boss—who happens to be a pretty creative guy—but wouldn't he resent me at least a little if I suddenly started critiquing his work?** When you get negative feedback from any direction, there's no question: It feels bad. But our study suggests that managers facing employee criticism can deal with that negative feeling and keep their focus on improving their creativity.

Your question dovetails with another research project, which I just finished collecting data on. I went to a second

company in Korea and used surveys to measure managerial actions that could be viewed as retaliatory. Then I looked at whether the employees involved had given those bosses any negative feedback in the previous round of performance evaluations. The results were clear: Critics had been retaliated against. So even if managers respond to criticism by upping their creativity, it doesn't mean they won't get even.

**Yikes! Sounds as if I should watch my step.** You do have to be a little careful. I saw three kinds of retaliation in that company: Managers intentionally lowered employees' performance evaluations. They became aggressive and even abusive toward them. And—this was particularly disappointing—they engaged in social exclusion.

**Could companies skirt the problem by anonymizing and aggregating the negative feedback that goes to managers?** Yes, I think it might be wise for companies to measure all the feedback flows—top-down, bottom-up, and lateral—and combine the flows rather than break them down when presenting the information. For instance, they shouldn't say, "This is aggregated feedback from subordinates," because then bosses might retaliate against *all* subordinates. I'm testing this with one company now.

**What about positive feedback—did you look at that?** That's another project I've been working on. I've found that there's ultimately no relationship between praise and creativity, because there are two opposing mechanisms in play. Positive feedback can be good for creativity; it makes people feel recognized, and they might put more effort into their jobs as a result. But there's also an effect whereby once you're complimented for your work, you don't do anything to improve, because you think you're doing perfectly fine as it is.

**How did you get interested in this subject?** Before going to graduate school, I was a software engineer—a really terrible one. I got tons of negative feedback. Like most people, I didn't enjoy it, and I thought my creativity was probably suffering as a result. Software engineering has a lot to do with creativity. But then I went into academia—where you're constantly receiving critical comments—and I began to see that negative feedback could help me improve, too. I realized it could generate both good and bad outcomes, and I decided to study those phenomena.

**How can companies keep negative top-down and lateral feedback from killing people's creativity? Should they throw manager and peer reviews out the window and make sure that criticism comes only from the bottom up?** The Korean company in our study did implement a formal system for employees to give their bosses negative feedback. That's one possibility. Another is to create an automated system that provides objective feedback—for example, an algorithm that counts the number of errors in a software program or the volume of goods that a salesperson has sold. In those cases there would be no reason for people to feel threatened by the negative feedback—it would be coming from a computer.

**If a normal amount of criticism boosts a boss's creativity, would a whole lot of it be even better?** If I were to completely ignore the research I'm doing on retaliation, I'd say sure: Employees should share all their negative feedback with their managers. That would really improve the higher-ups' creativity. But my subsequent work shows that if employees did that, it could come back to bite them. ☹

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