Feedback hide and seek

Let's think about the last time a manager, teacher, friend, or stranger offered an evaluation of your performance. What did they say? How did you react at the time? How did it make you feel? What actions did you take to accept or ignore the input? More often than not, you will have recalled a negative or difficult feedback experience, so it's no wonder you have an aversion to proactively seeking criticism. But as Figure 1 shows, you'll benefit heaps if you push past those uncomfortable feelings and take feedback on board.

Figure 1. Where the magic happens is far from your comfort zone.

You should frame extrinsic (external) feedback, like intrinsic (internal) feedback (see Track, progress, success, PDF, 107 kB), as an essential step in your development. Without the push-pull forces of the call to change, you may stagnate and fail to improve or move forward towards your goals. Important, long-term, and long-lasting change does not happen unless you track your progress. Think of feedback as a check-in point for yourself. Recognise it as a process and skill that will help you personally and professionally if you actively work on it.

✏️ Activity 1: Do I hide or do I seek? (Poertner & Miller, 1996))

Answer the questions below:

O = Often   S = Sometimes   R = Rarely

Question	O	S	R
I truly listen to what feedback givers are saying.			
I keep feedback in perspective and don't over-react.			
I try to learn from all feedback, even if it's poorly given.			
I am willing to admit to and learn from questions about my performance or behaviour in class or at work.			
Rather than avoiding feedback, I attempt to turn every feedback session into a useful encounter.			
I accept redirection and reinforcement rather than denying them.			
I accept responsibility for my role in achieving individual, team, and organisational goals.			
I accept responsibility for searching for solutions to performance and behavioural problems that threaten goals.			
I accept responsibility for keeping my emotions in check during feedback discussions.			
I am committed to listening and learning in all feedback situations.			

Results

I answered mostly:	My skills for receiving feedback effectively:
Often	are well developed
Sometimes or Rarely	could use further development

Inviting evaluation

You need to decide what purpose feedback has for you. In most cases, people want to improve their future performance and opportunities by gathering advice that redirects or reinforces behaviours presently being performed. Once you've accepted your understanding of the purpose, you can address welcoming feedback and the stimulating way it can inspire you to take action!

Instead of viewing feedback as an insult, a hurtful criticism, or a signal of your failure, consider it objectively by separating the assessment from your sense of self. It is the writing, not the author, that is under review. Remember to see 'FAIL' as the First Action In Learning.

Self-assess

Imagine the upcoming return of assignment feedback or a performance management review at work. Before you receive written feedback, how do you think you went? Do you know the criteria against which you are being evaluated? What rating and comments would you make in your self-assessment? This gives you the baseline you need to start tracking your performance and progress over time.

Compare

After reading through the feedback, what is your initial reaction? Is it fair? Do you agree? Is everything clear? What comments do you have? What questions would you like to ask? Do you need more information? Are your strengths identified? Are areas for improvement specified? Can you see how you might address these areas?

If you have questions, want more information, need clarity or examples, then you can contact the feedback giver for a meeting.

Reach out

When requesting further explanation, it is important to decide what kind of feedback you want, as this will impact the way you phrase your request and the way you interact when receiving additional feedback. Do you want to be encouraged and supported or do you want your strengths and weaknesses explicitly identified? Do you want the grade and performance measures explained or examples of how things could have been done differently and thus improved? Your request to discuss the written feedback provided should clearly identify the type of feedback you desire.

Prepare

When meeting to discuss an assignment, it's a good idea to assemble and thoroughly review all the resources supplied to you. This includes your assignment, the rubric (marking criteria), the feedback (via GradeMark, if applicable), the Originality Report (via Turnitin), the Studiosity feedback if you used the free service, and any feedback you may have received from a Study Smart Librarian.

Receiving Evaluation

In the feedback session you need to be prepared to welcome all comments. Are you ready for this? Complete the activity below.

Activity 2: Self-Assess

Tick if you agree:

I will:	✓
truly listen to what feedback givers are saying.	
keep feedback in perspective and not over-react.	
try to learn from all feedback, even if it's given poorly.	
admit to and learn from questions about my performance or behaviour at uni.	
attempt to turn every feedback session into a useful encounter.	
accept redirection and reinforcement rather than denying them.	
accept responsibility for my role in achieving individual and team goals.	
accept responsibility for developing solutions to performance and behavioural problems that threaten goals.	
accept responsibility for keeping my emotions in check during feedback discussions.	
listen and learn in all feedback situations.	

Listen

People who have mastered feedback seeking know to listen to all comments without reacting to them in the moment. These people tend to write down the advice given to them, focus on understanding and gathering examples at the time, and address in-depth consideration later.

Active listening requires attention and concentration on the speaker, their words, their ideas as well as non-verbal communication cues. These include body movements (e.g. hand gestures, nodding head), posture (e.g. open and uncrossed arms and legs), eye contact (e.g. in Western culture, eye contact connection signals engagement), so called paralanguage (e.g. tone, pitch, and speed of speaking), space (e.g. sitting and standing a respectable distance from each other), facial expressions (e.g. smiling or frowning and blinking), and physiological changes (e.g. sweating).

Parrot

After listening to the comments, seekers paraphrase back to the feedback giver to signal their understanding of the advice. This process helps you to verify the information you have received and begin to separate it from your own emotions as well as the sense of self that is often tied to your performance.

Example:

Student:

So, what I hear you saying is that I need to spend a little more time refining my database search keywords and boundary fields to ensure I target the specific assignment question parameters?

Lecturer:

That's right. You need to control the search from the very beginning and you need to know how to use the advanced search features to do so successfully.

Explore

Next the seeker actively asks open-ended questions, such as 'Could you give me an example of… ?', instead of closed questions which only require a Yes/No response. This activity helps to further consolidate your interpretation of the evaluation and begin to build an action plan towards improvement in future performances. This step is particularly important if you feel the advice given has been unclear in any way. For example, if you are still unsure about which of your behaviours have been reinforced (i.e. things you did well), and which need to be redirected (i.e. things you need to improve), ask about your strengths and weaknesses with specific examples.

Acknowledge

Finally, after the back-and-forth discussion comes to a close, the feedback seeker expresses thanks for the feedback giver's time and contribution.

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Dealing with evaluation

After your feedback meeting you should take time to do an individual debrief to reassess and plan ahead.

Reactions

To start, consider your reactions to this new information. How do you feel? Remember that emotions can be heightened in situations where we feel criticised. It's important to separate the criticism of the work from the sense of self. By doing so, you are better placed to harness feedback for your own self-improvement rather than self-deprecation.

Judgement

Then move on to assessing the advice given. Are the points reasonable? Do you agree with the strengths and areas of improvement that were identified? Do you want to accept all/some or reject all/some? Raising your awareness of the things you do well and the things that need attention not only helps you grow and develop but also to recognise where others can add value. This is incredibly critical when you work in teams or large organisations, where individual contributions help achieve communal goals.

Action plan

Finally, you can start to create an action plan to address the areas that need improvement. What did the feedback giver suggest? What other approaches, services, or support can you access to begin to look at this need? Who else could help you? What can you do to address this need? Knowing what you know now, what would you do differently next time? What will you avoid next time? What do you plan to make sure you do next time? What will you avoid next time? What do you plan to make sure you do next time? How will you know when you've improved?

The following table provides examples of the types of comments that markers may give you on assignments or verbally during a feedback meeting. Alongside these comments are strategies for developing ways to improve your work.

Feedback	Feed-forward strategy
'You haven't done enough reading and therefore your essay is poorly researched'	Use the Library to research relevant material – if you can't find appropriate material you may need to consult a librarian.
'You've given lots of information but you haven't really analysed the material'	You need to refrain from just using description in your essay, and instead apply critical thinking (PDF, 128 kB) and analytical writing skills to the topic.
'The parts of your essay do not seem to fit together very logically'	You need to have a clear understanding of the genre's structure in which you are writing. You need to be clear about the content and the line of argument you are developing. If you need help in planning essay structures, you could approach your tutor.
'It's difficult to understand the overall structure of your essay'	Your introduction should explain your overall structure. The body of the essay should be consistent with your introduction.
'You have made some good points but you have not substantiated them'	An essay should indicate that you have read to develop a conceptual understanding of the topic, and then this evidence is used to support your particular line of argument or discussion. Referencing these sources shows the reader that you have done both things.
'You have plagiarised parts of this essay from several sources! See me!'	It is important that you interpret the source material in your own words as a paraphrase, and where this is not possible, you use direct quotations. The lecturer needs to be able to see that you understand the ideas and concepts in your sources and that you can use these to develop your own argument.
'You need to improve your English language skills'	You may need to seek extra help to improve your English writing skills. The Library has many English language workbooks and textbooks that you can work through on a needs basis and at your own pace.
'Your essay is untidy and poorly presented'	You may need to allow more time after you have completed your essay to check for presentation details.
	You may also need to develop your word processing (PDF, 716 kB) skills.

More information

How to use feedback effectively: A guide for students (PDF, 771 kB). This is part of the DEFT Toolkit developed by the Higher Education Academy UK.

References

Poertner, S. & Miller, K. M. (1996). *The art of giving and receiving feedback*. Virginia Beach, VA:

Coastal Training Technologies.