

Why You Probably Aren't Getting Enough Feedback... and What To Do About It

Management guru Ken Blanchard often quotes his friend, Rich Case, as saying, "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." If that is the case, how often and how well are YOU™ being fed?

If you're like most leaders I've met in my [executive coaching practice](#), you aren't getting enough regular feedback. That's why the best self-leaders ask for feedback regularly. If no one is offering you feedback because of your heightened position, or if you don't feel you're getting honest opinions that you can use, you have to take the initiative to go after it. There's simply no better way to excel in your current position and accelerate your career.

Of course, asking for feedback may not be something you love to do. Let's face it: It can be somewhat painful to learn about your shortcomings, even if there are only relatively small issues that need improvement. But the other reality to face is that *not* accepting criticism can cause your career to come to a crashing halt. So, it becomes a matter of trading off the long-term pain of a career that isn't reaching its full potential for the short-term potential pain of a little constructive criticism. That feedback could ultimately help you move forward and perhaps even help you reach heights beyond what you thought possible.

Once you know what needs improvement, you're then armed with the information you need to move forward. There's a certain excitement from developing your self-leadership skills and getting better at your job. It's almost guaranteed to rejuvenate you and give you renewed energy in your position ... if you let it.

Why Don't Leaders Seek More Feedback?

Despite the known benefits of getting input from others, too many executives continue as usual without getting enough feedback about their performance. Why is that? These are the five main reasons I've seen. Do you recognize yourself in any of these?

- 1) As you climb higher, you become less coachable.
- 2) You let your ego/pride stop you from getting feedback.
- 3) You're concerned that the feedback you do get won't be genuine.
- 4) The feedback received doesn't come from the right people.
- 5) You're content to just continue on as you've always done, as long as nothing appears to be wrong.

The Do's and Don'ts of Feedback

The bottom line: It's critical at all levels of an organization to get feedback from others. Here are some do's and don'ts that will assist you in getting feedback you can truly use:

Do make it clear to feedback providers that you're sincere and want their remarks to be honest. Encourage them to be candid, and let them know that's exactly the kind of input you're looking for.

Do ask for feedback from coworkers at different levels from within the organization—your boss, your subordinates, key peers, and colleagues. They might have varying perspectives on your work and your behaviors, so getting all of their opinions will help you see a multitude of viewpoints from a “surround-sound” perspective. That can help you grow in different ways.

Do say “thank you” when someone shares feedback with you—and that's all you need to say, whether you agree with what you heard or not. This holds especially true if they offered perceived “negative” inputs. If you're not the sort of person who's good at taking criticism, there's nothing wrong with “rehearsing” ahead of time. Try to anticipate the points people might tell you, and prepare yourself emotionally to react well. You don't need to commit to making a change on the spot; you can decide what to do with the feedback later. Just thank your feedback provider, genuinely, and remember that they've given you information you can use. View it as a gift – because it is.

Do listen closely, and take notes on what is said. Don't try to remember your feedback providers' remarks in your head because if you're feeling any emotion or anxiety, no matter how prepared you think you are, your mind will likely get cluttered. Plus, when the person sees you writing down their remarks, they'll be convinced you really *are* sincere about getting honest feedback. And it will be helpful, later, to have your notes in front of you as you review the inputs and plan what to do with them.

Do devise an anonymous questionnaire if you think you might not get genuine feedback any other way. Again, those who hold very top positions may find it difficult to persuade subordinates to speak with honesty or to criticize “the boss” in any way. Your own comfort level might even be enhanced if you can ask questions in writing. Design the questions in whatever format will suit your purposes: You can write questions that require simple “Yes” or “No” answers, or those that rate you on a scale of 1-6 or 1-10. Or you can combine these styles, even asking a few “narrative” questions, e.g., to write a sentence or a paragraph in response. You'll be able to see which types of questions bring the most useful information and remember that for future surveys.

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Do hire a [coach](#) to interview selected colleagues and subordinates if you think those feedback providers might be too intimidated to give you straightforward inputs directly. Have the coach assure the feedback providers that their comments will be kept completely anonymous. Their responses will almost certainly be more forthright if they know that no one will share “who said what” with the feedback recipient.

Do create questions that correspond to specific key self-leadership qualities or skills that you want to improve. Here are a few suggestions—you can pick and choose—but always try to start off with “positive” input questions (e.g., the first two below) as people are generally open to sharing “negative” inputs once they've had a chance to share positives first.

- What would you say are the top three things that I am doing well (what should I continue doing)?
- What would you like me to start doing?
- What would you like me to stop doing?
- What do I do too much?
- What do I do too little?
- What do you need from me that I haven't been providing?
- How could I communicate better?
- What could I do to help improve overall productivity?
- If you were in my position, what would you suggest I do differently compared to what I'm doing now?

Don't make your request too open-ended by saying something like, “Give me feedback, please.” People won't know what to say, and they'll likely be lost trying to figure out what you're looking for. But if you ask them specific questions, such as those from the list above, you will probably end up with very useful inputs that can drive tangible strategies for improving your performance and strengthening your self-leadership skills.

Don't ask for feedback from colleagues or direct reports when they are in a group. I once witnessed a CEO who did this. Instead of asking his staff for feedback one-on-one, he surprised them in a group meeting with the question, “Okay, let's get it out on the table now: How am I doing?” Later, many of the direct reports told me they felt “ambushed.” Most of them glanced down at their hands and said nothing. Only one person in the meeting had the courage to tell the CEO what he thought, and guess what happened to that individual? The boss held a grudge against him and didn't treat him fairly from that moment on.

Don't get defensive, no matter what kind of feedback you get. You've asked people to be honest with you (and you *did* mean it, right?), so if you don't accept the criticism gracefully, there's a good chance they will never offer honest feedback again. Just think about the CEO in the above example—if you had been in that meeting, can you imagine *ever* offering him honest feedback

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again? No way. So, he will become yet another senior-leader executive who will never find out what people really think of him, simply because he was too insecure to accept genuine criticism. Of course, that kind of insecurity goes strongly against the grain of self-leadership. It's extremely important to train yourself to keep silent and listen actively while receiving feedback.

For more self-leadership tips, pick up a copy of my latest book, [Leading YOU™: The power of Self-Leadership to build your executive brand and drive career success](#)

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In her coaching practice, speeches, and corporate learning programs, Brenda brings her many years of transformational coaching successes, insights, examples, and real-world stories to the rewarding task of helping leaders reach their full potential.

After earning her MBA from Harvard, Brenda spent a large part of her career as an executive in *Fortune* 100 multinationals, building brands across dozens of countries spanning four continents. Now, as President of her own company, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through a unique, creative, and practical combination of leadership and branding. Visit www.BrendaBence.com.

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