# HOW TO DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH FEEDBACK AND CRITICISM

veretis

*I take compliments and I take constructive criticism. Not everyone loves you. It's the way you react as a footballer. I use it all to make me play better*
**Tim Cahill**

*Feedback is the breakfast of champions*
**Ken Blanchard**

*Life is not so much about happenings, but what we tell ourselves about those happenings*
**Epetetus 34AD**

We have all been in situations in the workforce where we have received some negative feedback. No matter what age, how experienced and how mature we may be it is common to find ourselves reacting in specific ways when we receive criticism, with likely responses being; **defensiveness, anger and self-consciousness.**

Conversely, when we are on the other end and are giving critical feedback to a team mate or staff member, we may also find this process elicits some sort of response in us, with common responses being; **discomfort, avoidance or heightened stress and anxiety.**

However, what is important to note is that throughout our career we will find that feedback, whether giving or receiving, is an inevitable part of our working life and a great opportunity to learn and grow. It is therefore important that we look at helpful ways to manage ourselves in these moments to help us optimize our potential to gain from the process in a positive way.

This booklet aims to provide you with an understanding of the common roadblocks that can get us stuck after receiving or giving feedback, and how we can look to overcome them.

## Roadblock One. The way we think when we receive and give criticism.

Cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) is a highly evidenced and researched approach to understanding our reaction to situations in the world around us. The premise of CBT is that our thoughts and beliefs will mediate and effect the way we behave and feel in a situation.

For example, let's look at an example where three people are waiting at a train station and the train is running late. It is important to highlight that all three people are placed in the exact same situation but are responding and behaving differently to the news.

**Person A** appears to be calm and is off to get a coffee. **Person B** seems anxious and nervous, pacing up and down the platform and sitting down because they feel very stressed. **Person C** seems to be frustrated and annoyed and yells rudely at train conductor, behaviour which leads to them being asked to leave the platform.

At this point it is important to consider what has lead to three people in the same situation to have three different responses? CBT suggests that the way **people think or appraise a situation influences their behavior and feelings in that situation.**

**Let's look at what each person was thinking that day:**

**Person A**: 'Oh good, I can go get a coffee now'

**Person B**: 'Oh no, I am going to be late to work and all my colleagues are going to think I am an unreliable employee. I am going to loose my job!'.

**Person C**: 'Bad things always happen to be, it is so unfair, everyone is out to get me. I can't stand this'

When each person's thought is revealed, we start to see each person was thinking very differently, a variation that CBT indicates would better explain their different behavioural and emotional responses to the same situation. It is also worth noting how well matched the individual's thinking is with their behavior. Person A had calm thinking and thus responded calmly, person B was having worried and catastrophic thinking about the event which would better explain their anxious behaviour and person C seemed to have more angry upset thinking which would better explain why they were yelling at the train conductor.

As we start to understand thinking can play a role in the way we feel and behave in situations, it can be helpful to then learn about our own thinking styles and the types of thoughts we can have. CBT suggests that thoughts can be either helpful or unhelpful. Helpful ways of thinking tend to be more balanced in their perspective, realistic and have evidence to support their validity. Unhelpful thoughts, on the other hand, tend to be unrealistic, less balanced and have little evidence to support their validity.

CBT is well researched and has found unhelpful thinking styles tend to increase negative or upsetting emotions and behavior and helpful thinking patterns tend to increase productive behaviours and helpful emotions. For example, person C had more angry and unhelpful thoughts and thus engaged in behavior that worked against them as they were asked to leave the platform for yelling at the train conductor. Conversely person A had more relaxed helpful thinking and thus had more relaxed behavior, taking advantage of the time to get a coffee.

The benefit of the theory is that once we understand out own thought patterns, we can then learn to challenge, change or manage unhelpful thinking patterns that may be getting in the way of us engaging in more fruitful and positive behaviours and emotions in the future.

For example, if person C had managed his thoughts and rationalized that although this situation was not ideal, there were many good things and people in his life that were supportive of him, he may have not have felt so angry and personalized the situation. This rationalization may have reduced their anger and unhelpful behavior where they yelled at the train conductor and were asked to leave the platform.

So how does this fit in with understanding the roadblocks to giving or receiving criticism? **CBT can be used as a framework to help us identity whether we are having unhelpful thinking patterns about giving and receiving feedback and if so, how to manage these to help us have more helpful emotions, responses and behaviours when giving this news.**

Albert Ellis and other well known Psychologists have identified many unhelpful thinking styles that may get in the way of someone performing a task at their optimal level.

# Unhelpful Thinking Styles

'**Mindreading** (i.e., assuming that others are thinking negatively about oneself),

**Catastrophizing** (i.e., making negative predictions about the future based on little or no evidence),

**All-or-nothing-thinking** (i.e., viewing something as either-or, without considering the full spectrum and range of possible evaluations),

**Emotional reasoning** (i.e., believing something to be true based on emotional responses rather than objective evidence),

**Labeling** (i.e., classifying oneself negatively after the occurrence of an adverse event),

**Mental filtering** (i.e., focusing on negative information and devaluing positive information),

**Overgeneralization** (i.e., assuming that the occurrence of one negative event means that additional bad things will happen),

**Personalization** (i.e., assuming that one is the cause of a negative event),

**Should statements** (i.e., thinking that things must or should be a certain way), and

**Minimizing or disqualifying the positive** (i.e., ignoring or dismissing positive things that have happened).

Thinking about these unhelpful thinking styles and considering the situation where we give and receive criticism, examples of unhelpful thinking patterns that may present in conflict could be as follows:

**Mindreading.**

Employee receiving feedback: 'They think that I am underperforming and don't like or value me'

Employer giving feedback: 'This employee will think I'm a horrible boss when I tell them this'

**Catastrophizing.**

Employee receiving feedback: 'This feedback means that I will loose my job and I don't know if I will find another one. How am I going to support my family?'

Employer giving feedback: 'What if the employee gets angry at me and starts yelling?'

**All-or-nothing-thinking.**

Employee receiving feedback: 'This means I am terrible at my job'

Employer giving feedback: 'My employees underperforming means I am terrible at my job'

**Emotional reasoning.**

Employee receiving feedback: 'This feedback makes me feel anxious so it must be bad and I should be worried'

Employer giving feedback: 'I feel nervous so this meeting will not end well'

**Labeling.**

Employee receiving feedback: 'I am not skilled in sales'

Employer giving feedback: 'I am not a good manager'

**Mental filtering.**

Employee receiving the feedback: 'That feedback was all bad'

Employer giving feedback: 'This did not go well at all'

**Overgeneralization.**
Employee receiving the feedback: 'This feedback was not good so I can only imagine that the rest of my day will be as equally as bad'

Employer giving feedback: 'This employee didn't take that well and now every other employee will have problems with me today'

**Personalization.**
Employee receiving feedback: 'This feedback means I am not good at doing my job' .

Employer giving feedback: 'Giving bad feedback suggests I am not doing a good enough job with my employees'

**Should statements.**
Employee receiving feedback: 'I should never get bad feedback so this is bad' .

Employer giving feedback: 'I should not be giving bad feedback, it should always be positive'

**Minimizing or disqualifying the positive.**
Employee receiving feedback: 'That meeting was all bad'.

Employer receiving feedback: 'That meeting went terribly'

If you are observing that you are experiencing any of these unhelpful thinking styles about critical feedback you may find that this way of thinking could impact on your ability to use the feedback productively. For example after an employee receives feedback that they are taking longer to complete tasks that are required, they could personalize the feedback as being 'None of my work is good enough'.

This thought may in turn lead to behavior where the individual takes longer on future work as they are fearful that their work will be seen as not good enough, so they continue to perfect it. This is a process which in turn reinforces the behaviors that were a problem to start with.

However, if they managed their thinking and saw the feedback as being less personal and an opportunity to improve a single behavior, they are likely to be able to better address the issue. This could involve them feeling more encouraged to develop strategies to improve their productivity which in turn gets their work done on time.

So what can we do about our own thinking if we identify that it is getting in the way of productive change following feedback?As discussed earlier CBT helps us look at ways of changing our thinking patterns to help us better manage situations more effectively.

A way you can do this is to learn to challenge and rationalise unhelpful thinking styles using an evidence based framework . This involves building on your ability to start to see situations more for what they are than what we see them to be. For example, we start to look at our thoughts and gather evidence for and against the thought like a detective to help us conclude whether the thought is valid and factual or if it is only a thought with no proof it is a genuine issue.

Following this process we can then generate more accurate and balanced thinking which can assist us feel more receptive and engaged in a less desirable situation. An example of how to engage in this process is outlined on the next page and a blank worksheet to write down and challenge your own unhelpful thoughts is also available.

veretis

| Unhelpful Thought | Evidence for the Thought | Evidence Against the Thought | More Balanced Thought |
|---|---|---|---|
| Example: 'Recieving criticism means I am terrible at my job' | I received negative feedback | 1) I also received a lot of praise about my work in the meeting<br><br>2) My boss generally has good things to say about my work<br><br>3) My boss did actually state a few people are experiencing this issue so perhaps it is hard for many people | 1) Because I received both good than bad feedback, it would suggest I am not a terrible worker who is bad at my job.<br><br>2) I can't expect to receive good feedback all the time<br><br>3) Other people receive bad feedback and that does not mean they are terrible at their job |

veretis

| Unhelpful Thought | Evidence for the Thought | Evidence Against the Thought | More Balanced Thought |
|---|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |  |

veretis

## Roadblock Two: Our attitude and perception to feedback, growth and learning.

*'I've missed more than 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.'* Michael Jordan

Alongside our thinking, another roadblock to taking on criticism and giving feedback can be both our general attitude and our organisation's attitude towards feedback and learning. Carol Dweck, a Stanford Professor posited that people can have a fixed or growth mindset. Dweck indicated that individuals with a fixed mindset tended to believe their intelligence, IQ and skill set was permanent and never changed. Individuals with a fixed mindset are therefore more likely to see criticism as a sign they are not good at the task and are less likely to put in effort and hard work to develop and improve when provided with feedback.

A growth mindset, on the other hand, was one in which we tend to believe that our intelligence, skills and IQ are a starting point that we can grow and develop over time. A growth mindset sees mistakes, critical feedback and failures as learning opportunities and that with effort and hard work we can , learn, grow and improve our skills to optimizing outcomes.

Dweck has done extensive research on the benefits of adopting a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset. For example, a study was conducted which found that participants who had a growth mindset performed better than participants who had a fixed mindset.
Another study found organisations that adopted a  growth mindset approach will tend to perform better than organisations with a fixed mindset approach. Further research has also found individuals with a growth mindset showed an improvement in their decision-making skills and had a higher self-efficacy (belief in themselves to achieve) and better performance comparative to individuals with a fixed mindset.

Thus when considering feedback it is worth assessing whether our attitude towards feedback is coming more from a fixed or a growth mindset.

If you would like to learn about your current mindset, please do feel free to complete this quiz to obtain feedback about your current way of thinking:

http://blog.mindsetworks.com/what-s-my-mindset

A quick Checklist of the difference between how we view things from a Fixed or Growth Mindset is seen in the following diagram: Changing our Mindset.

## Changing Our Mindset

Carol Dweck, world-renowned Stanford University psychologist, talks about the power of our mindset or our beliefs (especially around challenge). We can either have a Fixed Mindset where we let failure (or even success) define who we are, or a Growth Mindset where we see setbacks as opportunities to grow and improve ourselves. Just like how we learned how to walk… there are many stumbles along the way, but to reach our potential and live the life we desire, it takes practice and perseverance. We always have a choice about which view we adopt for ourselves… and it's never too late to change. What's your view?

It's up to you!

| | FIXED MINDSET | GROWTH MINDSET |
|---|---|---|
| | Belief that my intelligence, personality and character are carved in stone; my potential is determined at birth | Belief that my intelligence, personality and character can be developed! A person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable). |
| DESIRE | Look smart in every situation and prove myself over and over again. Never fail!! | Stretch myself, take risks and learn. Bring on the challenges! |
| EVALUATION OF SITUATIONS | Will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? | Will this allow me to grow? Will this help me overcome some of my challenges? |
| DEALING WITH SETBACKS | "I'm a failure" (identity) "I'm an idiot" | "I failed" (action) "I'll try harder next time" |
| CHALLENGES | Avoid challenges, get defensive or give up easily. | Embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks. |
| EFFORT | Why bother? It's not going to change anything. | Growth and learning require effort. |
| CRITICISM | Ignore constructive criticism. | Learn from criticism. How can I improve? |
| SUCCESS OF OTHERS | Feel threatened by the success of others. If you succeed, then I fail. | Finds lessons & inspiration in other people's success. |
| RESULT... | Plateau early, achieve less than my full potential. | Reach ever-higher levels of achievement. |

If you identify that you have a more fixed mindset approach then we generally also find we have less motivation and interest in transforming and growing following criticism than if we developed a growth mindset approach.

veretis

To help change our attitude towards feedback and criticism, a variety of strategies can be considered. Some useful ways to help change our thinking, attitudes and beliefs from a fixed to a growth mindset are outlined below:

1)   Change your perception of challenging tasks, seeing them as more of a learning experience and personal growth opportunity in which you will understand what works and what does not.

2)   Look back on past mistakes and identify what you can learn from them and what you can takeaway to help direct your focus on the benefits of setbacks

3)   Engage in some research about an athlete or celebrity you admire. You may discover that their success is mainly though overcoming  setbacks and hurdles through consistent effort and hard work as opposed to natural talent alone. This task may increase your value and perceived  importance of hard work and effort.

As an employer or manager, it may also be helpful to consider how we can foster a growth mindset in our employees and our organisation.

Researchers have found that participants who are praised for their effortstend to  perform  better and enjoy future tasks compared to participants who were praised solely for their intelligence.

Thus an important strategy we can adopt as leaders to help build a growth mindset and encourage people to work hard is to focus our praise on an employee's effort and hard work when it is observed instead of an employee's intelligence. This in turn may increase people's effort and engagement in tasks.

 Another strategy we could adopt is looking to hire learners who already believe in the importance of growth and development compared to those who do not value these traits.

We can also look to having employees engage in side projects that encourage more mastery/learning orientated goals comparative to focusing on outcome orientated goals. Meetings that focus on ways we can improve and how to recover from setbacks could also support foster a growth mindset culture.

# Summary

Receiving or giving criticism can be a difficult and confronting situation for many people.  Often we can dismiss or personalize the experience or feel uncomfortable and unsettled by what we hear or need to say.

However, if we can understand and manage unhelpful thinking that can get in the way of taking on feedback in a useful way and change our general attitude about feedback this in turn can help us take on criticism constructively and improve, develop and be the best we can be.

Developing a Growth Mindset as opposed to a Fixed Mindset is critically important as noted earlier.

We hope you have found this booklet useful to support you identify any roadblocks you may have to effectively taking on or giving feedback!

veretis

# References

Beck, J. S. (2011). Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Second Edition: Basics and Beyond.The Guilford Press. New York

Chase, M. A. (2010). Should Coaches Believe in Innate Ability? The Importance of Leadership Mindset. Quest, 62, 296-307

Dweck, C.S. (2006). Mindset: The new psychology of success(pp. 108–143). New York: Random House.

Dweck, C. (2017). Mindset: Changing The Way You think To Fulfil Your Potential. Robinson.

Eurich, T. (2018). The Right Way to Respond to Negative Feedback. Harvard Business Review.Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2018/05/the-right-way-to-respond-to-negative-feedback

Ellis, A. (1974). Rational-emotive theory: Albert Ellis. In A. Burton (Ed.), Operational theories of personality. Oxford, England: Brunner/Mazel.

Henderson, V. L., & Dweck, C. S. (1990). Achievement and motivation in adolescence: A new model and data. In S. Feldman & G. Elliott (Eds.) At the threshold: The developing adolescent.Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Johnston, I. (2017). Creating a growth mindset. Strategic HR Review, 16(4), 155-160, https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-04-2017-0022

Keating, L. A., Heslin, P. A. (2015). The potential role of mindsets in unleashing employee engagement. Human Resource Management Review, 25, 329–341

Mueller, C. M., & Dweck, C. S. (1998). Intelligence praise can undermine motivation and performance. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 75, 33–52.

O'Kelly, M. (2010). CBT in ACTION: A Practitioner's Toolkit.Australia: CBT Australia.

Rnic, K. K., Dozois, J. A. D., &, R. A. Martina. (2016). Cognitive Distortions, Humor Styles, and Depression. Europe's Journal of Psychology.
12(3), 348–362. doi: 10.5964/ejop.v12i3.1118PMCID: PMC4991044
PMID: 27547253

Yeager, D. S., &Dweck, C. S. (2012). Mindsets That Promote Resilience: When Students Believe That Personal Characteristics Can Be Developed. Educational Psychologist, 47(4). 302-314 https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2012.722805