

**Harvard
Business
Review**

Receiving Feedback

13 Ways We Justify, Rationalize, or Ignore Negative Feedback

by Peter Bregman

February 14, 2019



Jan Stromme/Getty Images

Summary. Most of us dislike negative feedback so much that we've even changed the name — it's not negative, it's constructive. But it's an irreplaceably valuable gift. We need to know when we are doing things that don't land the way we planned. When our impact veers from... [more](#)

Everybody loves feedback . . . as long as it's positive.

But most of us dislike *negative* feedback so much that we've even

changed the name — it's not negative, it's *constructive*.

Still, it's an irreplaceably valuable gift.

We need to know when we are doing things that don't land the way we planned. When our *impact* veers from our *intention*. And the best — often times the only — way to discover that gap is through feedback.

That said, chances are you fight against it.

It doesn't *feel* good to be told you missed the mark. And, since feedback often uncovers our blind spots, it's especially jarring because, in many cases, we thought we were doing a good job. So we don't immediately or intuitively agree with the validity of it (we tend not to believe things we can't see ourselves).

This is especially true for leaders who, because of rank and power, don't often get told the whole truth.

So, it's not unusual for leaders to get defensive when we hear criticism about our leadership. It doesn't fit with the story we tell ourselves.

In order to understand this issue more intimately, I asked the person I work most closely with to give me negative feedback, to expose one of my blind spots.

I took a breath and readied myself. I wanted to go slowly and notice everything that happened in my mind and my body.

"You work too hard," She said. As criticism goes, this was a softball.

Still, here's what happened:

That's a compliment, I thought, not a criticism. She was trying to tell me that I am acting in ways that are unsustainable for me and for the organization, but my protective response was pride.

That thought was quickly followed by another: *She doesn't work hard enough!* I de-validated her feedback by de-validating her. *It's not that she's insightful, my ego decided, it's that her bar is not high enough.*

And then another thought: *I have to work so hard because the business depends on me.* I made excuses to justify why I act the way I do. In other words, sure I work too hard but it's not my fault.

Meanwhile I felt a squirrely feeling in my abdomen and could feel the vulnerability of not being perfect. It was subtle but definitely a *felt* experience. A physical reaction, a feeling that something wasn't right.

As an executive coach who helps successful people become great leaders and create more effective teams, I'm often in the position to give people feedback that's hard to hear.

As I thought about my own reaction, as well as the reactions I often hear from clients, I began to list the common things we say (or think) when hearing negative feedback to defend against new information that threatens the way we see ourselves:

- Play Victim: "Yes, that's true, but it's not my fault."
- Take Pride: "Yes, that's true, but it's a good thing."
- Minimize: "It's really not such a big deal."
- Deny: "I don't do that!"
- Avoid: "I don't need this job!"
- Blame: "The problem is the people around me. I hire badly."
- Counter: "There are lots of examples of me acting differently."
- Attack: "I may have done this (awful thing), but you did this (other awful thing)."
- Negate: "You don't really know anything about X."
- Deflect: "That's not the real issue."
- Invalidate: "I've asked others and nobody agrees with the feedback."
- Joke: "I never knew I was such a jerk."

- Exaggerate: “This is terrible, I’m really awful.”

If you ever notice yourself saying, or thinking, any of the above, it’s a clear sign that your ego is getting in the way of an important learning.

A lot has been written about how to receive feedback well, some of it quite nuanced. But once our ego is involved, and we feel the emotional charge, it’s hard to access nuance. What we need, is a simple, reliable, default response:

“I really appreciate you taking the time and the effort to tell me. Thank you.”

Isn’t that the way you would want someone to respond after you gave them a gift? Accept the gift (in this case, that means *listen*), and then say “thank you.” That’s it.

This response communicates to people that it’s safe to offer you feedback and they will be far more likely to speak directly to you, instead of behind your back.

There’s also an almost magical added benefit to this simple, undefended response: It dramatically increases your ability to take in the feedback. When you stop defending against it *externally*, you actually stop defending against it *internally* too.

After my colleague told me, “You work too hard,” and I quietly observed all my own defensive reactions, I followed my own advice. “I really appreciate you taking the time and the effort to tell me,” I said. “Thank you.”

The result? She thanked me for receiving it so well *and* I’ve actually begun to put less pressure on myself and others.

Maybe that’s why they call it *constructive* feedback after all.

Peter Bregman is the CEO of Bregman Partners, an executive coaching company that helps successful people become exceptional leaders and stellar human beings. Best-selling author of *18 Minutes*, and *Leading with Emotional Courage*, his most recent book is *You Can Change Other People*. To identify your leadership gap, take Peter's free assessment.