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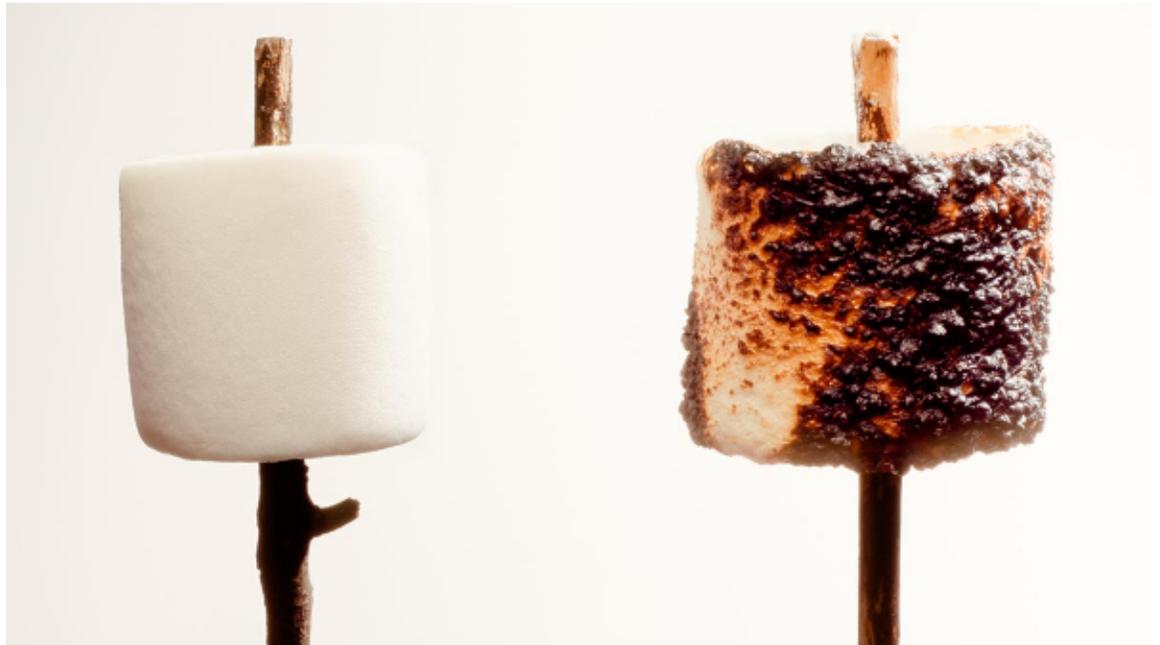
The Key to Giving and Receiving Negative Feedback

by Joseph Grenny

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Rich was a plant manager with a 10,000-person workforce producing a billion dollars of product per year. He was a pro at his craft and highly respected in his industry. I met with him and his team weekly as an organization development consultant for a couple of years. Someone from HR asked him to participate in a new program called “360 Feedback.” He had never heard of such a thing but thought it seemed worthwhile. “After all,” he told me, “feedback is the breakfast of champions!”

He dutifully identified about 24 director reports, peers, and others to fill out the structured surveys. Two weeks later, he received his feedback — all gussied up in an official looking folder with pie charts, line graphs, and verbatim quotes from his colleagues. The results left him feeling crushed. For days afterward, he arrived at work early, locked his office door, and didn't emerge until others had gone home.

Most people dread both giving and receiving feedback because we've either experienced — or imagined — an episode like Rich's. We heard something about us that provoked painful emotion. Or we expressed concerns to others and they recoiled in horror. Our belief that these types of exchanges will carry a high probability of hurt makes us understandably reluctant to invite them.

When feedback goes badly, we draw exactly the wrong lesson from the experience. We assume the problem was the *content*. For example, Rich concluded that the pie charts, line graphs, and quotes in his feedback report *created* the misery he felt for the subsequent two weeks. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Feedback doesn't have to hurt. In fact, under the right conditions, there is nothing we want more than to know the "truth" as others see it. We want to know how others feel about us and our performance. I've worked closely with dozens of senior executives over the years — and the number one complaint I hear from them is that *people won't tell them the truth*.

The predictor of misery is not in the message itself; it is in how *safe* people feel hearing the message. If people feel psychologically safe, they crave truth. If they feel unsafe, even the tiniest hint of disapproval can be crushing.

When I discovered Rich had cocooned himself in his office, I knocked on his door. His feedback report was sitting in the middle of the blotter on his desk. When I asked what was so hurtful in it he said, "They think I'm controlling! I can't believe it. They think I'm a micromanager!" The irony here is that prior to receiving his feedback, I had asked for his predictions and he had said confidently — and with a bit of a smirk — "They'll ding me for being a control freak." Now having heard the very message he expected, he was feeling leveled by it. Why?

Clearly it wasn't because of the content. You can say almost anything to someone if they feel safe. Likewise, you can hear almost anything, if you feel safe. Now let me be clear — I'm *not* suggesting negative feedback will make you feel giddy — but I *am* suggesting that if you feel psychologically safe you'll be able to hear it, absorb it, reflect upon it. Rich's misery didn't result from feedback about a personal weakness, but from his conclusion that the feedback was a personal attack. It was his belief about *intent* not his disagreement with *content* that generated his despair.

Here are some principles for helping yourself and others feel ready to give and receive feedback.

1. **You can't make others feel safe.** My emotions are my responsibility. No one can pour soothing neurochemicals into another person's brain to quell the fears that trigger defensiveness. We are ultimately responsible for understanding the fears we carry and for managing them when they interrupt our ability to engage in honest and open dialogue with others. The ultimate responsibility for making me feel safe falls on me.
2. **You can make it easier for others to feel safe when offering feedback.** There is a lot you can do to reduce the likelihood that others will feel unsafe hearing your feedback. For example:
 - *Get your intention right before you open your mouth.* There's a difference between feedback and blowback. Feedback is information intended to help others learn. Blowback is information used to wound. If someone has let you down or performed poorly, and you're feeling resentful or angry — deal with your own emotions before attempting to engage in a dialogue. When you feel a genuine concern for the growth and development of the other person, you're ready to talk — and not a moment sooner.
 - *Ask permission.* Control is central to safety. Never give feedback until it is invited. Offer it, but then wait until the other person feels ready to receive it. When you ask permission by saying something like, "Can I give you some feedback about your presentation?" you recognize the fact that the other person is responsible to get herself into a healthy emotional state before the feedback arrives.
 - *Share intent before content.* People become defensive less because of *what* you're saying than because of *why* they think you're saying it. For example, in Rich's darker moments, he believed his colleagues were trying to take him down. It wasn't that he disagreed with what they said, it's that he concluded anyone who would say something like that must have malicious intentions. Before sharing feedback, ensure that others understand your positive intentions in sharing it. For example, "When you have a moment I'd like to discuss how the sales trip went. I want to be sure I'm doing my best for you on these trips and want to share ways it can work better for me as well. Can we talk?"

3. You can make yourself feel safe before receiving feedback.

- a. *Get ready before opening your ears.* Never invite feedback until you are ready for it. “Ready” means that you want to hear the truth, not simply validation. If after receiving feedback you feel defensive, it might be that you wanted approval, not information. For example, when Grandma asks, “Do you like my spinach casserole?” she may really mean, “Tell me I’m a good grandma!” Rich got into the same trouble. He later reflected that, “When I opened the folder my eyes first searched out the relative scores — I was hoping to see that I was better than my peers.” When others give you feedback, you set them up to fail when you make them responsible for your feelings of safety and worth. Don’t do that. Find healthy ways to affirm and center yourself. Meditate. Reflect on your personal values and beliefs. Use whatever rituals work for you to connect with a sense of worth that is independent of others’ assessments prior to opening the spigot — then listen with curiosity, not insecurity.
- b. *Hold boundaries until you’re ready.* If you feel unready to receive feedback, do yourself and others a favor and let them know. Then take responsibility for scheduling a time by when you will properly prepare yourself. Better to admit that you’re feeling too vulnerable than to prove it by being defensive.
- c. *Be curious.* The best inoculation against defensiveness is curiosity. Act like a detective pursuing a mystery called “I wonder why they feel that way?” Ask questions. Request examples. Stay curious until — even if you don’t completely agree — you can see how a reasonable, rational decent person would think what they think. Later, you can decide what you agree or disagree with, but for now, your goal is simply to learn. Curiosity inhibits defensiveness because it keeps the focus off of your self worth and on the experience of others.

Rich could have avoided a lot of pain by monitoring his own motives and safety prior to tearing open his envelope. Others could have mitigated his reaction by assuring him of their positive intentions in offering their critique. Pain is not an essential byproduct of feedback — it is the result of an absence of safety.

Joseph Grenny is a four-time *New York Times* bestselling author, keynote speaker, and leading social scientist for business performance. His work has been translated into 28 languages, is available in 36 countries, and has generated results for 300 of the Fortune 500. He is the cofounder of VitalSmarts, an [innovator in corporate training and leadership development](#).
