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It's hard to say who dreads critical feedback more: the manager giving it or the person receiving it. As the receiver, it can be uncomfortable and stressful to hear that you're not performing well. And the manager, knowing this, fears that the receiver may not react productively and therefore is likely to postpone sharing their views.

But we all need and want feedback. That's how we get better at our jobs and advance in our careers. So it's up to you to show your boss that you are willing to hear and act on feedback. The more your boss perceives you as "coachable," the more likely they are to take the risk and time to give you their feedback.

So what can you do to increase your boss’s perception of your “coachability”? Here are a few suggestions based on my research and experience working with managers around the globe.

Solicit feedback. Indicate to your boss that you would appreciate their feedback and advice. You can also share some preferences as to when the feedback would be most helpful. For example, I often say to colleagues that at the precise moment when we end a three-week program, “It’s hard for me to process anything other than ‘This was great!’ If you give me two hours, I can start hearing constructive feedback. Tomorrow morning, I’ll be able to hear anything!”

Be grateful. Thank your manager for giving it. If it’s hard for you to appear grateful, say so. You can say something like, “I’ve worked really hard on this task and I was really hoping to ace it, so it’s a bit hard for me right now to hear that there are a few things I could have done better. But I do hear from you that there are quite a few things that did go well, and I am grateful for that, and I also fully realise that the feedback you are giving me will help me to get better. So while I may not look thrilled right now, I still value your feedback very much and I will work on it.”

Keep in mind that no boss is perfect. Yes, maybe your boss could have said this more nicely or in a more insightful way or maybe they could’ve chosen a better time or place – but when you get frustrated, consider your boss’s perspective:

- Bosses don’t always have enough time to perfectly clarify their thoughts. They could have thought about it more, but then they would have delayed it more and at some point there is a trade-off between quality and timing.
- Bosses have limited time and energy to allocate to a multitude of tasks. Giving feedback is only one of those tasks, and you are likely one of several people your boss needs to give feedback to.
- Bosses are under pressures of their own. Sure, your boss could have been a bit more supportive, but if you look at your boss with some empathy for their workload, it may help you realize that under the circumstances, your boss made a commendable effort.

Don’t be defensive. Never argue with the feedback giver. Don’t focus on the part of the feedback that makes no sense to you right now. Take the feedback under advisement and ask yourself if there could be a kernel of truth—if not from your point of view, maybe from your boss’s point of view? At a minimum, this discrepancy may help you realize that your boss has a different take on the situation or that you and your manager’s expectations aren’t aligned. If after careful reflection and attempts at perspective-taking, you still don’t agree or understand your boss’s feedback, find a constructive way to ask for additional insights. For example, you might say something like, “You have told me a few times to [do this instead of that]. I’m grateful for the feedback, and I would really like to work on this because if it’s important to you, then it’s important to me. My challenge is that I’m having some difficulty [explain what you don’t understand]. Could you help me with that? Could you add a few words on what it is you expect?”

Similarly, if you're trying to implement your boss's feedback and are only succeeding imperfectly, acknowledge the situation. For many bosses, a fault confessed is half redressed.

Act on it. There is nothing more frustrating for bosses than to repeat the same advice over and over again. Very few of us enjoy being a nag. In addition, for many bosses, employees disregarding feedback feels like a lack of respect for their own competence (“When I value advice I take it on; Joe is not taking on my advice, ergo Joe is not valuing my advice—and hence not valuing me.”) and/or authority (“Even if Joe disagrees with me, he should still respect the fact that I have the right and the ability to penalize him if he disregards my views.”).

Put yourself in their shoes. If in doubt, ask yourself what kinds of behavior your own employees could display that would increase your willingness and ability to give them more constructive feedback. I bet that a number of the points above will appear on your list. Then consider these behaviors in the context of what you know of your boss. Which of these is likely to matter to them? What does your boss particularly value when it comes to giving feedback?

The more your boss believes that you'll make good use of the feedback, the more feedback you will receive. And it gets even better: You'll also get more positive and constructive feedback. If your boss perceives you as valuing their feedback and being both willing and able to act on it, they are likely to be more patient, appreciative, and supportive of your efforts. Think about it: When your employees acknowledge their imperfections and clearly work on them, trying to integrate your suggestions and feedback, aren't you going to be a bit more patient with them? When in spite of considerable effort they fall a bit short, will you harp on them or will you encourage and commend their effort while adding a suggestion or two?

Granted, some bosses are unreasonable individuals and equal opportunity abusers with zero patience for anything less than perfection. But this kind of boss is a significant minority. Most bosses will give you more feedback if you make it more rewarding for them to give it to you. And the more coachable you are, the more this feedback is likely to be supportive and encouraging.

Jean-François Manzoni is Professor of Leadership and Organizational Development at IMD. His award-winning research on boss-subordinate relationships includes *The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail* (with Jean-Louis Barsoux, Harvard Business School Press, 2002).
