

How Women Can Learn from Even Biased Feedback

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When receiving their [performance reviews](#), most people find such feedback conversations to be difficult, no matter how skilled the feedback-givers are. In a recent survey I conducted of 360 working adults, 89% said they were not looking forward to their upcoming performance review. When asked why 74% said they found such conversations to be either uncomfortable or unhelpful.

Men and women alike in the sample reported feeling not very optimistic that the feedback they'd receive would help them actually improve in their work. But men and women differed in an important, though possibly unsurprising, way: Women expected more gender bias in their feedback than men did.

The women were onto something: [Gender bias in performance feedback](#) is a well-documented phenomenon. Women are less likely to receive specific feedback tied to work outcomes, while men are more likely to get the advice they need to move to the next level of seniority in their organization. When giving feedback to women, managers tend to focus more on the women's personalities and attitudes. Contrarily, they focus more on the behaviors and accomplishments of men.

To address gender bias in feedback processes, many organizations have been making changes to their internal systems such as eliminating the self-assessments that are often required before managers give feedback (which tend to disadvantage women, who often are less comfortable with self-promotion than men) or focusing on skills tied to the job rather than allowing the manager to provide unstructured feedback.

But these efforts often take a LONG time to establish, leaving women to sift through feedback that may be unhelpful and detrimental to their careers. In the meantime, here are three ideas every woman can implement.

Focus on learning

In an interview, Bozoma Saint John, Netflix's chief marketing officer, told me that she had never received a positive review until very recently. For many years, feedback givers urged her to "tone it down" or "slow it down." As she read through such reports, she decided she could make fast progress if

she wrote her own review prior to reading formal ones. After a big project or an important meeting, she would give self-reviews, reflecting on what she did well or poorly, and identifying areas or skills to keep developing. By the time she read her annual performance review, she could concentrate on elements that she had already reflected on, thus making the best of the feedback she received.

Then, before digesting her annual reviews, Saint John would ask herself one question: “*What can I learn that will make me better?*” By staying focused on this question, she found she was able to avoid feeling strong emotions and reflect more thoughtfully on the feedback she received. I’m finding in my research-in-progress that this is a good strategy for all women. When I presented men and women with the same feedback, some of which was negative but constructive, women reported finding it more negative than men did. But when I asked recipients to focus on what they could learn from the feedback before they actually read it, women were more likely to say that they would take steps to address the feedback and improve as compared to women who just read the reviews, and the gender difference disappeared.

Ask questions

As part of my research on annual performance reviews, I’ve observed many feedback conversations and read through hundreds of feedback reports delivered to employees at all sorts of companies. I’m often struck by the way the process can break down. First, what the givers intend to convey and what they actually express to recipients may differ dramatically. Second, what the givers express and what the recipients actually hear may also differ dramatically. Finally, the recipients are faced with bridging the gap between the feedback they received and the steps they would need to take to improve. In other words, the feedback is so vague or unclear that the recipient doesn’t know how to act on it. While these breakdowns occur more often when feedback recipients are female versus male, my research-in-progress shows, the third step is particularly challenging for women as they often receive more ambiguous feedback than men do.

To see what I mean, imagine being told, “You need to be more assertive” or “You need to show your potential more fully.” These types of statements, which women often receive, are so ambiguous that they leave the recipient wondering what the giver meant when delivering this feedback. Asking the feedback giver questions throughout the process can generate feedback that’s clearer and more specific. In addition to reducing ambiguity, asking questions can turn feedback from one-way communication into a productive dialogue that strengthens the relationship.

Assume positive intent

For many people, asking questions feels uncomfortable or seems risky. They worry that the feedback giver will construe the questions as challenges to him or her. Women tend to become more willing to ask questions about the feedback they receive when they assume that the feedback giver has positive intent — that is, that their manager wants them to do well. In an unpublished study of about 300 women, I found that when they were asked to assume the feedback giver’s positive intent, they were also more likely to show curiosity toward ambiguous feedback and ask more questions. In the process, they received feedback that was more helpful to them and their career development.

Learning from the feedback we receive is often challenging, as our desire to grow conflicts with our equally strong desire to be appreciated for who we are. For many women, part of the difficulty is knowing that gender bias affects the feedback they receive. Until feedback processes evolve to the point that they are no longer biased, women can adopt these three strategies to leverage feedback as a way to get stronger and recognize their own potential.

The post "How Women Can Learn from Even Biased Feedback" was first published by Francesca Gino here <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-women-can-learn-from-even-biased-feedback-francesca-gino/>

About Francesca Gino

Recognized as one of Harvard Business School’s top-rated professors, one of the world’s 50 most influential management thinkers by Thinkers 50 and Poets & Quants’ 40-under-40 Professors.

Bestselling author, most recently, of “Rebel Talent: Why it Pays to Break the Rules in Work and Life.” REBEL TALENT explores how rule-breaking can be a constructive rather than destructive force. Rebels challenge the status quo in ways that drive positive change. Undaunted by novel situations and ideas, they adapt to change as a matter of course.

TEDx talks on the surprising benefits of curiosity, how it diminishes as we grow older and how we can recapture our inquisitive instinct and help others do the same. Regular contributor of Harvard Business Review and the Wall Street Journal. Speaking and consulting clients include Google, Ferrari, Disney and Walmart, and the U.S. AirForce, Army, and Navy.

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