



# Getting past "ouch:" How to make feedback work

By Jennifer Porter | June 1, 2016

A colleague of mine, whose opinion I value deeply, recently gave me some feedback that was hard for me to hear. Once I got over my discomfort, I learned two important lessons: first, that I had a behavior that needed fixing; and second, that feedback has three stages.

The first – or “ouch” – stage is where the feedback stings. We may feel hurt, embarrassed, shocked, or any range of painful emotions. Occasionally, this passes quickly, but more often, this discomfort can linger.

In stage two, we believe (and often say), “It’s not me, it’s you.” Stage two gets our defenses up. We see the feedback as the giver’s problem, not ours:

- “I wasn’t unclear in my instructions. You just weren’t paying attention!”
- “I wasn’t sweet-talking the boss. You’re just jealous that I got the better assignment.”
- “Just because I was critical once isn’t the problem. You’re critical all the time!”

It’s not that we’re consciously trying to dodge the feedback; we really do see the other person as the problem.

If we’re lucky, we get through this second stage and move on to stage three: learning. This is where we can actually see the truth in the feedback – and there is almost always some truth in the feedback – and think about what we can learn from it.

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Sometimes we get through these three stages quickly. More often, it takes some time.

With the feedback I received from my colleague, the process took me about two weeks. I’d like to tell you I flew right through stages one or two, or even skipped them and got right to the learning, but it just isn’t true. My ego was wounded. I was a little embarrassed. And yes, I blamed my colleague. It took time to move to a place where I could truly learn from the experience.

Of course, I’m not the only one to get feedback. A big part of my job as an executive coach is to give feedback to clients. I’ve been coaching two executives, Ed and Derek (not their real names), who both received very, very negative feedback recently.

As part of my work with each of them, I collected feedback from 12 to 18 of their direct reports, peers, managers, and other senior leaders via interviews. In both cases, the resulting feedback report highlighted strengths but also raised significant development areas, including:

Arriving late to meetings, being on the phone, and generally giving the impression of not caring about the discussion at hand

Publically criticizing people and their performance in a way that left them feeling beaten and humiliated

Not following through on commitments, leading to a lack of trust that he would do what he said

In both cases, many of the leaders' colleagues concluded that the individual should probably not be in his leadership role, and that the organization would be better served if he were in a very senior individual contributor role instead.

Ouch!

This is where Ed's and Derek's stories diverge. Ed received the feedback report prior to our debrief meeting and then postponed the meeting. A day later, he emailed to tell me he didn't want to continue with coaching. I asked him why, and requested feedback on our coaching, but I haven't heard from him.

I can't know for sure why he chose to discontinue our work together, but my hypothesis is that the feedback was just too uncomfortable. The "ouch" was too painful, and he wasn't ready, willing, or capable of exploring it and learning from it. Ed is a smart, capable, and good person and has been wildly successful in his career. He has a lot to offer his company. And right now, learning from feedback doesn't appear to be his priority.

Derek reacted differently. At first, he tried to skip over the "ouch" stage and the defensive stage and go straight to learning. He wanted to move quickly from the feedback to what he could do differently. A week or two later, after he had some time to reflect more on the feedback, he shared how painful it was to

hear. And yes, he started to explain why one person I had interviewed had said what she said – and why she was the problem, not him. To his credit, he quickly caught himself and recognized that almost all feedback contains an element of truth, and that he had heard this one person's truth.

Derek is now deep in the learning phase. He has gone back to each person I spoke with to offer thanks for the feedback, share what he learned, ask further questions, and explain what they can expect from him going forward. These follow-up meetings are often the hardest – and the most valuable – part of the feedback process. They go a long way toward repairing any damaged relationships, and they require a lot of strength to resist defensiveness and focus on learning. Derek has done this really, really well.

It's interesting to note that Ed has been asked to step down from his leadership position and take a very senior strategy role with no direct reports. It's unclear whether he'll repair the relationships he damaged. Derek is still leading his large global team, has received accolades from his manager and many colleagues for how he handled the feedback, and is working hard to improve his leadership. It's been hard work for him to process the feedback and get to the learning. He has persevered because he believes it's worth it.

I have to believe that Ed's shift away from a leadership role and Derek's progress are both directly related to their ability – or lack of ability – to get to the learning stage of their feedback. I've seen very few leaders who can continue their trajectory of success at senior levels without navigating the "ouch," moving past their defensiveness, and becoming skilled at learning from feedback.

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