How to receive feedback as a leader, even if you don't want to hear it

Victor Snyder, consultant at BossMakers and business columnist at Forbes and Entrepreneur shares his advice on how leaders should receive feedback, even if they don't always want to hear it, and why it's important for company growth.

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Part of being an effective leader is giving direction. You need to be able to lead your team and inspire their best output. But an equally important element of leadership is being able to take direction—and that includes receiving feedback.

Being able to receive feedback effectively and openly is a must for today's leaders. Welcoming feedback will not only make you a better leader, but it will also help your employees to feel heard, respected, and understood—which makes for a stronger, more effective team. And while that's always important, it's <u>especially important during times of change</u>, transition, or uncertainty—like the one we're all experiencing now, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

You know feedback is important. But let's be honest; receiving feedback can be challenging—especially if that feedback is something you don't particularly want to hear. So, how can you move through that challenge and not only accept constructive feedback from your team, but use it as a springboard for growth—for yourself and for your company?

Visualise receiving constructive feedback

When your employees deliver constructive feedback, you want them to walk away from the conversation feeling acknowledged and empowered—and a lot of that boils down to your reaction.

If your reaction is positive—including what you say, how you say it, and your facial expressions and body language—they're going to feel like the feedback conversation was positive, and will feel empowered to openly give more feedback in the future.

But if they read your reaction as negative, they're going to think twice about initiating any future feedback conversations—and, as a result, you won't get the feedback you need to improve yourself and your organisation.

The catch-22 here? When someone tells you something that's hard to hear—like challenging feedback—you're not always in control of your reactions. And even if your vocal response is positive, your involuntary reactions (like facial expressions or body language) might send a different (and not so positive) message.

Which is why, if you want to be more effective at receiving constructive feedback from your team, you need to get a clear idea of what those unconscious or involuntary reactions are—and get them under control.

That's where visualisation comes in. Visualisation is a powerful thing; a recent study found that people who visualised themselves working out over the course of 12 weeks gained nearly half as much muscle as people who spent those 12 weeks actually working out in the gym.

And if visualisation can help you build muscle without lifting a single kettlebell, it can definitely help you get better prepared for a challenging

feedback conversation.

Stand in front of a mirror and imagine someone on your team delivering challenging feedback (or, even better, ask a coach or trusted colleague to role-play and deliver that challenging feedback in real-time).

What happens to your face and body? Do your shoulders tighten up? Do you cross your arms? Do you start to frown or scowl? Then, visualise how you want the conversation to go. What does your body language look like? Are your shoulders relaxed? Arms open? Do you have a wide, friendly smile?

Leveraging visualisation to recognise any involuntary or unconscious reactions to hard-to-hear feedback can help you gain awareness around those reactions—and, more importantly, will help you better control your reactions when you're having an actual feedback conversation with an employee.

Practice the pause

In a perfect world, you'd be able to control how and when you receive challenging feedback; you'd be able to schedule the conversation for a time when you were feeling rested, relaxed, and open.

But we don't live in a perfect world, and more often than not, challenging feedback will come from employees when you're not expecting it—and potentially aren't in the best frame of mind for hearing it.

When an employee delivers feedback you don't want to hear—especially if you're caught off-guard—your first instinct will probably be to react. But your initial reaction to challenging feedback might not be your best reaction—which is why it's so important to practice the pause.

When an employee delivers feedback that's particularly hard to hear, pause and take a deep breath. Instead of reacting to what they said, give yourself a moment to gather your thoughts and choose a response.

It seems simple, but taking that moment to pause can stop your initial reaction or defensiveness—and instead, allow you to respond in a way that's constructive and affirming for your employee.

Validate your employee's experience—even

if you don't agree with them

At some point, you're going to have an employee deliver feedback that isn't something you don't want to hear—it's something you just flat-out disagree with.

But the truth is, whether you agree with them is irrelevant. It's important to validate your employee's experience—even if you think they're wrong. Validation is an important driver of performance.

And while validating your employees is always important, consider it <u>especially important now</u>, when social distancing has emotions running high and many are feeling more raw and vulnerable than usual.

If an employee gives you a piece of feedback you don't agree with, acknowledge it, thank them for sharing, and let them know you're going to give their feedback some serious thought and consideration.

After that, one of two things will happen. You'll either a) realise that their feedback was actually spot on and adjust your behaviour accordingly, or b) realise that their feedback doesn't ring true for you, in which case you move on.

But regardless of the outcome, validating your employee's feedback—even when you disagree with it—sends the message that you value and respect their opinion, which will make them more likely to give you helpful, constructive feedback in the future.

Follow through

The most important part of effectively receiving feedback as a leader—even when that feedback is something you don't want to hear? Follow through.

When employees see that their feedback is not only being heard but being used to inspire positive change, they're going to feel empowered to continue delivering that feedback—and you're going to continue to get the feedback you need to improve yourself as a leader and your organisation as a whole.

On the flip side, if they feel like they're delivering constructive feedback and nothing is happening, it can discourage them from openly sharing

feedback in the future.

So, when a team member gives you a piece of feedback, listen—and then take action. Follow through on their feedback, make any necessary changes, and then follow up to make sure they're on board with how their feedback is being implemented.

Follow-through is important even if, for whatever reason, you can't take action on an employee's feedback (for example, if their feedback is something you disagree with or something that simply won't work from a logistical perspective).

In those scenarios, make sure to follow up with your employee and take the time to explain to them why you're not moving forward with their feedback. That way, they feel acknowledged—and know that, even though their feedback isn't being implemented, it's not being ignored, either.

Embrace feedback to become a more impactful leader

Most leaders (and most people) don't enjoy getting tough-to-hear feedback. But the most effective leaders embrace that feedback—and use it to make themselves, their teams, and their organisations better.

Right now, everyone is unsure of what the future will hold. But by addressing mental health, helping managers to support employees, and joining a larger purpose, company leaders can help their employees feel better.

Victor Snyder is a consultant at _BossMakers_ and a regular columnist and

contributor to business publications such as Entrepreneur and Forbes. You can get in touch with him through his Twitter profile @VictorGSnyder.
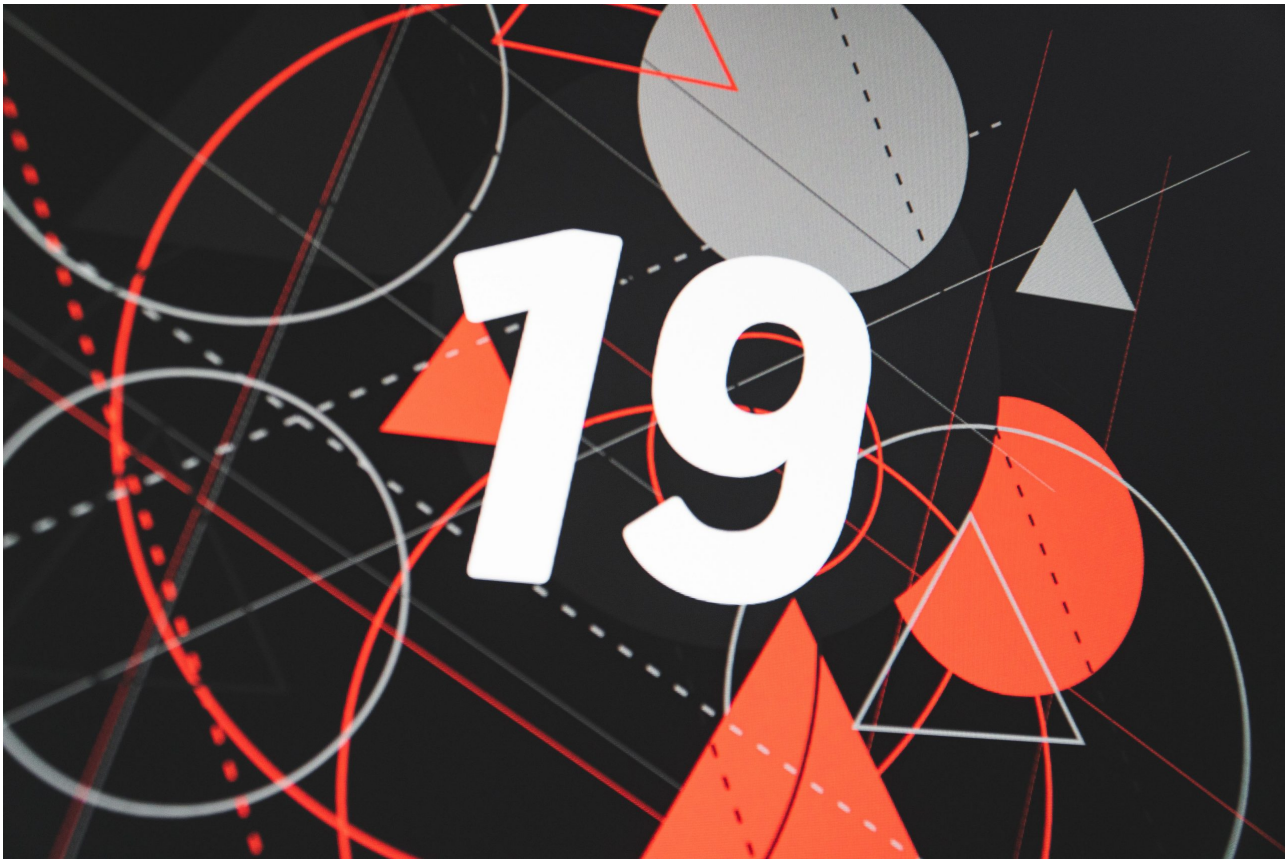
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