

Where's the gift? Interpreting feedback accurately
"You ain't gonna learn what you don't wanna know..."

By Jill Matlow, Wall Street Dead aHead Family Member



Photo courtesy of pixabay.com

Many years ago, during my annual performance review in pharmaceutical advertising, the Executive Director who reviewed me said: *"This is not a personality contest"*. Ouch! She was referring to the glowing feedback I had received from the Creative Team (a group of people I worked closely with on a daily basis) when I was an Account Supervisor. She somehow managed to turn what I thought was a very positive thing—fostering good working relationships with your colleagues—into something which was very negative (i.e. being the winner of a personality contest).

She obviously didn't know how important a relationship GPA was!

What was also communicated to me was that I was not focusing enough on the brand and its competitors, something I could have easily learned over the course of time. Her technique in giving me feedback reminded me of the feedback sandwich (or lack thereof). In a feedback sandwich scenario, the person giving the feedback starts with something positive about your performance but then adds that area which "needs improvement" followed by more positive feedback. In this particular instance, starting with a criticism was not what I had anticipated.

Recently, I was sharing some other feedback-related stories with my youngest nephew Zach, who in my opinion has a very high emotional intelligence (I'm obviously partial as his aunt). He asked me if I ever read the book: *Where's the Gift?* by Nigel Bristow, which highlights how we can effectively interpret feedback without judgment or emotion. I loved the title of that book which basically illustrates how sometimes you can receive a gift (i.e. feedback) which might not be beautifully wrapped but still contains a gem inside.

After reading *Where's the Gift?* I had a better understanding of interpreting feedback and realized in hindsight that the Executive Director, while her delivery might not have been perfect, was offering me some constructive criticism that in the end helped me during my years working in pharmaceutical advertising.

The book highlights some very practical steps for all of us to follow. One of my takeaways was giving the benefit of the doubt to the person offering us feedback. In most cases, they do have our best interests at heart. It's a great way for us to identify our flaws (gasp!) and work towards fixing them.

"The value of feedback depends less on the ability of others to give it well than it does on our ability to receive it well."

It doesn't matter what age you are, or where you are in life (student, professional, retired), receiving feedback (with the ultimate goal of making you be a better version of yourself) is always essential, although the delivery might not come "packaged" the way you had hoped.

To quote Deborah Solomon, the Founder of WSDaH, regarding feedback: *"You're reporting information to another person. It's as simple as that."* Or is it?

I reached out to some WSDaH Family members who have been on both the giving and receiving end of feedback and found their stories to be very relatable and helpful. Do you see yourself in any of these scenarios?

"One of the most important (and also potentially time-consuming) activities in any business is working with your employees and direct reports, and at times helping them to improve their performance. I'm sure we've all had that great boss here and there who could bring out the best in you and others on the team, and on the other side of the coin—that terrible boss that you couldn't wait to get away from."

I think it's important to remember that you first need to figure out if the other person is open to your feedback. As Jerry once said, 'You ain't gonna learn what you don't wanna know'. So how do you provide feedback to others with the goal of getting the best results in the future? I learned from these two case studies that no two scenarios are ever identical and your feedback should be tailor-made to fit each individual."

I had an experience once while coaching a financial advisor where he had just moved from one wirehouse to another. He did this thinking that he could take his clients with him to his new firm. As it turns out, his old firm was successful in preventing him from taking any of his clients for 18 months. Considering that he needed to have a certain number of accounts to fulfill his new contract, it was understandably a very stressful situation.

As we were speaking, we first had to work through his frustration and the emotions that came with that. I asked him several questions about how he thought he should plan out his next steps, knowing that he essentially had to build a new business from scratch at that point. I took the next steps that he provided, and we used that as the first parts of his plan. Focusing on things he could control were key; such as how many people he could contact per day, meetings he could have, etc. Long story short—his plan worked and he was able to build another successful business. If I had just told him what to do, I don't think it would have worked because people always act on their own ideas, not just ones that are given to them. His initial steps had to come from him, because then he had ownership of his own plan.

In another scenario, I worked with a successful female executive at a Wall Street firm who was very talented and very motivated. The problem was that her direct reports did not enjoy working for her, and other department heads didn't want to work with her. Her boss asked me if I would coach her because we all wanted her to be successful. She had a blind spot around this, which most people have in one way or another. We met and I began the conversation by telling her that I wanted to bring up a topic that she might not be aware of, and my intention was to help support her so I asked her to allow me to discuss this with her (understanding that I actually reported to her at this time).

When someone you're speaking with has a blind spot, they may become defensive, so you need to provide solid examples of what you're seeing, which I did in this case. I asked her what she thought she could do differently to help not only her but all of us and she came up with some suggestions. I provided some additional thoughts as well. We decided together to set up a quick weekly check-in so that we could review situations as she experienced them, and we could brainstorm together how she could adjust her approach. After a few weeks of this, she noticed that other department heads were more willing to work with her, which reinforced some of the subtle changes she had made. Because it was a blind spot, she wasn't aware that there was a problem, so taking little steps worked well in this case.”

[Dan Klein](#), President and CEO, [Sage Marketing](#)

“Giving and receiving feedback is a critical life skill. As a professor, I give frequent feedback and welcome feedback from students. As a consultant, I also offer opinions on performance.

In a corporate environment, people are always judging your performance. Teamwork is frequent in today's digital economy. Teams are often asked to rate their teammates, which I know is a highly charged idea, but it can be a compelling self-reflection opportunity. No one likes to receive negative feedback, but it is an opportunity for growth. If you are giving feedback, ensure that you are providing feedback effectively and make sure that you start with one piece of positive feedback. Evaluation in a corporate setting is only valuable if it is timely, frequent, descriptive, and specific.

Students do not like to receive negative feedback, but a university is a place for growth, and most professors look for students to improve over the semester. While metacognitive pedagogy has been proven to be highly effective, it is more time-consuming for professors and is often not used. Depending on the course, I give traditional feedback, allow for self-grading, offer peer grading, and sometimes use ungrading methodologies. Non-traditional feedback needs to be coupled with a self-reflective activity. Students learn more by honestly assessing their own work than by any input I can provide.

In an experiment last semester, I used a natural language processing suite to elicit a smiling face emoji for my feedback. While delivering the same feedback, students receiving 'happy' information were more receptive. The experiment proves that it matters not just what you say but how you say it."

[Allyson Heumann](#), Professor, [Tulane University](#)/Principal, Allyson Heumann & Associates

"Receiving feedback can be hard. As a recovering alcoholic of 25 years, enough time has passed where I can share my story and own it.

The last day that I had a drink was Oct 31st, 1997 and it was a good day until it wasn't. My in-laws were visiting and I took my brother-in-law to see the Black Crowes at the Beacon Theater. We had the best time taking the train in and out of the city to see the show. On the last mile of the trip, I had to drive from the train station back to the house. We lit a celebratory cigar to top off the night. While passing the cigar I dropped it, not wanting to burn the carpet. I tried to reach for it and caused the car to swerve. Officer friendly was there to see that and I rightly got pulled over. Fast forward past the DUI booking process that took until 4am. I called for a ride home from the police station. The wives showed up none too happy.

In the parking lot of the police station I managed to hurt each one of their feelings by being defensive and quite frankly it got out of hand. I woke up the next day with more than just a headache and immediately knew a change needed to be made. I was told I was getting a divorce or a therapist. I got a therapist and went into counseling for alcohol recovery. Upon further introspection, that turned into anger counseling and blessedly marriage counseling. Needless to say I had a lot of work to do. One of the things you end up having to do is go to those people you've wronged and apologize for your actions. Well there is always feedback. So much feedback that I had to learn how to process it. On my first attempts at apologizing and receiving feedback I got mad at what I heard and tried to blame the other parties as if they had 'made me' do things. Clearly that was not the case. I have learned from these hard lessons. First and the most important thing to know is no one makes YOU do anything. You choose how you act. If you make a mistake and you are lucky enough to have a second chance, it is best to listen and own your actions/behaviors. Denying or blaming other people, insults the person giving you feedback.

Giving feedback is hard too. One of the many good things that happened in the recovery process was that the management team at the bank I work at noticed a change in me. I was clear-headed, focused and had learned humility. I was given the chance to run projects, manage people and was promoted in the process. Once one starts managing people you inevitably have to judge people and their work. That means providing feedback. While I may have gotten therapy, other people didn't. That can be a challenge. While I had learned how to receive feedback, giving feedback can be hard.

In my first year of managing people I was put in charge of a small team and there were people who were more senior in age and experience on the team. In one instance I had to tell Bill, a 30-year veteran in the industry, that he just wouldn't listen to others' feedback. When I tried to speak to this coworker he exploded back at me that he should be the team lead. In my mind I thought 'yeah, that should be the case but you're acting like a child' and thus I could see why he was not chosen to lead. A good leader will listen to feedback from the team and adjust if needed. This gentleman just could not do that. It was his way or the highway and unless you own the company that won't work. I didn't know what to do so I asked my manager what to do. He suggested that I needed to find a way to get Bill to listen to me. To break through, I eventually had to stop listening to Bill, I mean really ignored him for more than a month until he formally scheduled a meeting to speak with me. When he asked why I ignored him for a month. My reply was simple 'Oh, you want me to listen to you?'

It had come full circle. He would not listen to others so I stopped listening to him until I got his attention. I had to use childish behavior to get his attention. That could have gotten me fired but I had the trust of my manager.

There are as many personality types and no one trick works for providing feedback. In my experience one needs to read the person you're speaking with and take into account the personality type. For those people who emotionally/mentally shut down after hearing frank feedback the compliment sandwich can work. With other direct or emotionally mature personality types you can use the softening statement and then honest critique so you don't dilute the feedback."

[Robert Tommaselli](#), Market Data Operations and Engineering, [RBCCM](#)

In the end, I think we are all a work in progress, striving to be better versions of ourselves. To quote John Templeton: "*Only through humility can you achieve great understanding.*"

References:

Bristow, N. (2000) *Where's the Gift?* Cascade Press