

The Receiving Feedback Playbook

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Receiving feedback well is its own skill, separate from delivering it and separate from asking for it.

Giving feedback is its own playbook: see [The Giving Feedback Playbook](#). Asking for feedback instead of waiting for it to arrive is its own playbook too: [The Soliciting Feedback Playbook](#).

One boundary worth naming: formal performance ratings and calibration are a different scope. This playbook covers informal, in-the-moment feedback only.

1. The 60-second version

The job on this end shifts from delivering feedback well to getting something usable out of it, even when it's poorly given. Before anything else, notice what kind of moment this is: did you ask for it, and did you see it coming? That changes what you reach for first (more in Section 3). Breathe, and say thank you regardless of what just landed. Name the type of feedback you think you're hearing (appreciation, coaching, or evaluation) before you react to its content. Go looking for the true part, even a small one. Pull beats push: what you go get is worth more than what happens to arrive.

2. The default play

Three needs sit underneath every piece of feedback, per Stone and Heen's *Thanks for the Feedback*: appreciation, coaching, and evaluation. Most receiving trouble comes from a mismatch between these. Coaching gets heard as evaluation ("you're telling me how to improve, but you really mean I'm not cut out for this"), or there's no evaluation stated at all, so ordinary coaching and appreciation get over-read for a hidden verdict. The single move that helps most: name out loud what type you think you're hearing, and ask if that's right, before you respond to the content. If you need both evaluation and coaching in the same conversation, ask for the evaluation first: until you know where you stand, it's hard to focus on how to improve.

From there: breathe, and say thank you regardless of what just landed, even when it stings. Leadership Explored, episode 8, works through this same sequence. Go looking for the 10 percent that's true, or even just 1 percent of it, instead of accepting or rejecting the whole thing at once. That gets harder the more personally something lands, and that unevenness is worth being honest about rather than pretending every piece of feedback is equally easy to sit with. Stone and Heen name a close neighbor to this move: difference-spotting, asking what explains the different read instead of relitigating who's correct. The mechanism behind why any of this works: a meta-analysis of feedback research found

interventions backfire when attention shifts onto the person instead of the work (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), already cited on the giving side of this playbook family.

Most feedback arrives incomplete: "this was bad" or "this was good," without much else attached. Getting something usable out of it is partly your job as the receiver. Ask what's missing, the specific behavior and the actual impact. Pause first if you need to. It's fine to say you need a minute rather than reacting on the spot.

That opening instinct, breathe first and say thank you regardless of what just landed, is good advice for anyone. For the higher-power receiver, it's more than good advice: your reaction is itself an intervention on whether this keeps happening. A leader's mood and reaction measurably spread to the group's mood and how the group actually works together (Sy, Côté & Saavedra, 2005). Section 4 below is the full version of what that means when it's your own team on the other end.

3. What kind of moment is this

Feedback also arrives in different kinds of moments, and the kind of moment changes what you reach for. This way of sorting feedback moments is my own; I didn't find a source that draws these exact lines. Feedback can be solicited or unsolicited, planned or unplanned, and separately, expected or unexpected.

	Planned	Unplanned
Unsolicited	The scheduled formal: most reviews, many standing 1:1s	The ambush: hallway feedback, no warning
Solicited	You scheduled time to ask (less studied, more below)	A quick, casual ask (less studied, more below)

The ambush: unsolicited and unplanned. This is the hardest combination for me personally: no context, no priming, and it can land harsh or judgmental, out of nowhere. My own move: work through the process anyway, and say thank you. If I'm not ready, I'll take it away or follow up later, telling the person straight that right now isn't a great time and I'd like to reconnect when I am (Section 5 has the exact line). One caution worth naming: be careful about reacting with questions too fast; answer too quickly and the question itself can come off as defensive, or it just won't be well-directed yet. Part of why it's hard: unsolicited feedback threatens your sense of choice in a way solicited feedback doesn't (Brehm's reactance theory, 1966). Section 5's closing line ends the exchange without escalating it, and the buy-time script there works here too. Weight the source before deciding how much it's owed: real authority over your work earns a follow-up for clarity; a peer's drive-by is more optional, weighed against your own judgment.

The scheduled formal: unsolicited but planned. You didn't ask for this content, but you knew the conversation was coming: most reviews and many standing 1:1s live here. CCL, the Center for Creative Leadership, has a model built for this: SBI-I, short for situation-behavior-impact plus intent. It adds one

move plain SBI doesn't have: asking about the giver's intent. CCL, Gallup, and Radical Candor converge independently on the same expectation: a scheduled conversation should never be where you first hear something. If it is, say so; "this is new to me" is a legitimate thing to say out loud.

Expected versus unexpected is a separate question from planned versus unplanned: you can see something coming without it being on the calendar, and get blindsided by something that technically was. A surprise lands harder than the same news seen coming; that's been demonstrated since the 1970s (Mineka & Kihlstrom, 1978). Sheila Heen describes the jolt of being caught off guard as getting knocked completely off center, feedback that comes out of left field. Her fix: name the surprise out loud, before addressing the content, separate from disagreeing with it or taking it personally. This is the in-the-moment cousin of the buy-time script in Section 5: naming the surprise gets your footing back in a sentence; buy-time is for when you need real time.

Two combinations get thinner treatment here: solicited-and-unplanned, a quick, casual ask, and solicited-and-planned, feedback you scheduled time to ask for. Both are less studied, and the material already in this playbook covers most of what they need: asking well, and the follow-through loop below. Two tools built for the giving side carry over directly, too. Validating without agreeing, acknowledging the feeling behind someone's reaction without conceding they're right, works on the receiving side as well (Section 5 has the line). So does the buy-time script. Reaching for a line you already know beats improvising mid-ambush.

Two more things change how any of this lands, on top of everything above rather than combinations of their own: public or private, and written or live.

Public or private. Research on workplace shame favors keeping correction private: public correction leaves people hypersensitized to later criticism, an effect that outlasts the moment itself. Manager Tools, already trusted elsewhere in this playbook family, argues the opposite on the praise half of that rule, calling "praise publicly, criticize privately" flatly wrong. I'm leaving that disagreement visible rather than blending the two into a false middle ground.

I criticize in private, no disagreement there. Praise in public is where I differ from the standard advice: it only works for the specific people who'd actually prefer to be praised that way, and I check that per person rather than applying it as a rule. In my experience, praise in public without the private, one-on-one praise behind it can land badly and embarrass the person on the spot, causing real friction with teammates who didn't get the same treatment. The traditional advice is, at best, incomplete, and at worst it's just wrong. Where a team's trust level sits likely moves the safe threshold either way; know your specific people rather than applying either rule by default.

Written or live. Written channels are a poor match for feedback more often than not: feedback about behavior is almost always ambiguous, and lean, written channels handle ambiguous content worst of all (Media Richness Theory, Daft & Lengel, 1986). The same words read harsher in writing, too: not watching them land in real time removes some of the restraint a live conversation naturally provides (the online disinhibition effect, Suler, 2004). One real exception: neurodivergent receivers genuinely do better with written feedback, since it removes the pressure of an immediate reaction.

4. Receiving with power

Everything above holds regardless of your seat. This part is for the case where the seat itself changes things: you're the one with more power in the room, hearing something hard from a direct report or your own team, and your reaction carries weight a peer's never would.

Your reaction is the intervention, not just a response to one. A leader's mood and reaction measurably spread to the group's mood and how the group actually works together (Sy, Côté & Saavedra, 2005). A look that's just a look from a peer reads as a verdict when it comes from someone who can affect your role. I've made a version of this point about my own leadership before: your emotional state and communication style directly shape the culture of a hundred-plus-person org, and a dismissive comment you don't even register as dismissive can shut down cross-functional collaboration for longer than you'd expect. The fix starts before you've decided what you think: don't react too quickly, and watch for frustration leaking through while you're still forming a response.

The instinct to punish the messenger is a bias in you, not a flaw in the message. People are wired to think less of whoever brings bad news, largely regardless of whether it's their fault (John, Blunden & Liu, 2019). For a boss, even a small version of that bias, a clipped reply, a flat look, has teeth a peer's doesn't: it's exactly what makes people edit what they tell you in the first place. Make it safe on purpose, even when you disagree with what you're hearing, appreciation before analysis, no defensiveness. Section 5 has the line for saying so out loud. Edmondson calls the whole move a productive response, and puts the test plainly: speaking up is only the first step; what a leader does right after is the real one.

Modeling it yourself is what keeps people telling you the truth. A leader's own visible feedback-seeking predicts their team's, and the effect is strongest exactly where the hierarchy is steepest (Mertens & Schollaert, 2024): modeling it yourself matters more, not less, the more hierarchical the room gets. Kim Scott's "go first" names the same move from the giving side: a boss who visibly solicits and takes criticism earns the standing to give hard feedback back later. Section 6's follow-through loop below is that same mechanism, aimed at your own team.

Take it seriously. Make space for it, an actual approach, and then do something with what you learn, or say honestly what you took from it. Don't brush it off because of who it came from. That's the whole beat in one line, and the one most likely to slip when you're busy and it stung a little.

I know what the other side of this costs, too, because I've been on it. Earlier in my career, I gave feedback upward, real feedback, not personal, that I think got waved off mostly because of who was saying it: what does someone in a lower-ranking seat know. I can't be sure what it cost the person who dismissed it, but my honest read, based on what I saw at the time, is that not taking it seriously hurt them longer term. They probably should have listened, even though I wasn't a peer or anyone senior to them. That's the lesson I still carry from it: the seat feedback comes from says nothing about whether it's worth hearing, and if you're the one in the higher seat, you're the one it's easiest to get wrong.

5. Scripts

Thank you, then clarify (for a truth trigger, when the content itself feels wrong or unfair):

"Thanks for telling me that. I want to make sure I've got it right. Can you give me an example of when you saw that?" "What I hear you saying is [X]. Do I have that right?"

Naming the type (for a type mismatch):

"Is this coaching, meant to help me improve, or evaluation, meant to tell me where I stand? I want to make sure I'm hearing it the way you mean it."

Separating the conversations (for a relationship trigger):

"I want to separate two things here: what happened, and how this conversation is going. Can we deal with the first one first?"

Buying time (for an identity trigger, or any moment that catches you off guard, ambush included):

"Let me sit with this for a bit and come back to you, rather than reacting right now."

Thanking visibly, when you're the one with more power in the room (Section 4):

"Thank you for telling me that — I know it's not the easy thing to say to your own manager. Give me a second to actually sit with it rather than react."

Naming a neutral reaction, so it doesn't get read as a verdict (the "frown that reads as a verdict" fix, Section 7):

"I'm quiet because I'm actually taking this in, not because I'm upset. Keep going."

Validating without agreeing (for when you're not ready to concede the point, but want to keep the conversation open):

"I can see why you'd read it that way. I'm not all the way there yet, but I want to understand it."

Naming the surprise is covered in Section 3, where Sheila Heen's own words for that moment are worth borrowing directly.

Closing out an ambush without escalating it:

"Thanks, I'll consider that."

Reconnecting after you've taken space (the ambush follow-up described in Section 3):

"Right now isn't a great time for this. I'd like to reconnect when I'm ready for it."

For a repeat offender, unsolicited and recurring:

"I've thought this through, and I'm moving forward with X."

Setting a boundary (see Section 8 for when):

"What you've said makes sense, and I've decided your suggestion isn't right for me right now." "I've heard your feedback, and I've made my choice. Let's not discuss it further."

6. The follow-through loop

Getting something out of feedback doesn't end when the conversation does. What happens after is its own process, the same way it is on the giving side.

1. Say thank you first, the same instinct that opens this whole playbook. Everything else here follows from that.
2. Go looking for the true part before you decide what to do with the rest. Stone and Heen call this right-spotting, looking for what's accurate instead of scanning for what to dismiss, even when only a small part of it holds up. Dan Shapero, LinkedIn's COO, is quoted in their book putting a number on it: even if ninety percent of the feedback is off target, the golden ten percent left over might be exactly the insight worth learning from. My own version of that math pushes further. I'll go looking for the true part even if it's only one percent, because that's still worth having. If you flatly disagree with something, say what you do agree with first.
3. If what you got is too vague to act on, go get what's missing. Sheila Heen has two questions worth borrowing directly: "Where is this coming from? What's the data behind it?" and "What is it that you want me to do differently?" Ask them in a way that keeps the conversation open rather than shutting it down: mirror back what you heard, paraphrase it, prime the other person to keep going, then ask the actual question.
4. Separate from pausing mid-conversation: if after the conversation you still need time to decide what to do with it, say so and commit to when you'll actually come back to it. "Can I think about this and get back to you?" It only counts if you follow through and return.
5. Closing the loop out loud isn't a requirement. If you act on the feedback, the change itself is the real close: they'll see it in what you do differently, a better signal than being told about it. A verbal close is worth adding when you know you're going to act: "You gave me this feedback, I thought about it. Here's what I'm doing differently. What do you think?" Saying it out loud rewards someone for having told you the truth in the first place. When I decide not to act, I usually skip going back to explain why, though who gave the feedback moves that default: coming from your boss, closing the loop out loud

is worth doing more often than not. The mirror case holds even more: when it's your own report's feedback and you're the one with the seat, closing the loop out loud is closer to a mechanism than a nicety, the same modeling mechanism Section 4 names directly. Aimed at your own team, the script becomes: "You told me [X]. I thought about it, and here's what I'm doing differently: [Y]. Keep telling me this stuff."

6. Same as the giving side: tie that loop-closing conversation to a rhythm you already have, a standing 1:1 or a regular check-in, rather than making it its own special meeting.

Stone and Heen's Open-Body-Close structure works as an optional frame for the conversation itself. Open by naming what you want from it. The body is the actual conversation, working through what happened. Close by confirming what you both committed to. The boundaries material in Section 8 is close kin to this loop, too: Nonviolent Communication's "protective use of force" reaches the same idea from a different door.

7. Failure modes and fixes

A truth trigger: the content itself seems wrong or unfair. Before arguing, separate where the feedback is coming from (what they actually saw) from where it's going (are they coaching you, or rating you). Treat your own defensiveness as a signal worth noticing, not proof the feedback is wrong.

A relationship trigger: who's delivering it changes whether you can hear it. Two conversations run at once here, what happened and how you're being treated, and they get tangled until you're arguing past each other. Stone and Heen call this switchtracking. Fix: name the two topics out loud and deal with them one at a time.

An identity trigger: the feedback threatens your story about who you are. This produces all-or-nothing swings, "I'm terrible" or "I'm terrific," instead of anything usable in between. Fix: separate what happened from how you feel about it, then take a second look, on its own, at the story you're telling yourself about what it means for your future. Those three get bundled by default and need to be taken apart on purpose. Stone and Heen break your reaction pattern into three pieces. Baseline is your default level of well-being. Swing is how hard something hits you. Duration is how long it takes you to recover. They put a number on how much of that pattern is learnable: roughly 40 percent, through how you interpret feedback rather than the feedback itself. That's real headroom, still learnable long after day one.

A type mismatch. Coaching gets heard as a verdict on whether you're cut out for the work, or ordinary coaching and appreciation get over-read for a signal about where you stand. Fix: ask directly whether the feedback is about how you're doing this, or about whether you should be doing it at all.

The process itself was illegitimate. Sometimes the feedback shouldn't have reached you the way it did, regardless of what's in it: hoarded until it's too late to act on, or relayed secondhand from a single source without checking it against a broader read. It can also arrive wrapped in performative empathy, the giver looking for comfort rather than giving you something usable. None of the four triggers above cleanly

cover this; the problem sits in how the feedback reached you, separate from how you're reacting to it. Fix: name what's broken about how the feedback arrived, separately from evaluating whether the content itself is true. The two are different questions, and the first doesn't have to wait on the second.

The frown that reads as a verdict. From the higher-power seat, a neutral reaction, even a merely tired one, gets over-read as rejection, purely because of who's doing the reacting. This sits apart from the four triggers above: the audience is doing the amplifying, and it happens no matter how small the reaction actually is. Fix: say out loud that you're taking it in. Don't let a flat reaction get read as a flat verdict. Section 5 has the line.

Point an agent at this section to help you practice receiving before a hard conversation: describe the feedback you're bracing for, and have it play the deliverer so you can rehearse staying curious instead of defensive.

8. Boundaries: when enough is enough

Refusing feedback is sometimes the right move, though there's no tidy list of exactly which situations earn a yes. What follows leans on real cases from *Thanks for the Feedback's* own boundaries chapter (chapter 10) rather than inventing a rule to cover every situation.

Stone and Heen name three kinds of boundaries, each answering a different question:

- **Thanks and no:** "I'm happy to hear your coaching, and I may not take it." You heard it; you're not obligated to act on it.
- **Not now, not about that:** you need time, or space, or this particular subject is too sensitive right now.
- **No feedback:** the relationship itself needs you to stop offering judgments on this, full stop.

A few signals say it's time to reach for one of these: character attacks instead of behavior; being taken hostage ("if you don't change, you don't respect me"); a threat instead of a fair warning; or no ownership at all of the giver's own part in it. A fair warning tells you what might happen; a threat promises to make it happen.

The mechanic that makes a boundary land without torching the relationship: use "and," not "but," holding both things at once, appreciative and firm, instead of one canceling the other. Section 5 has both lines, the everyday version and the harder one for stopping feedback on a subject entirely.

One more thing the right to decline doesn't erase: a duty to ask how your decision lands on the other person, and work toward something workable together rather than just declining and walking away.

9. AI-era

This sits somewhere in between: further along than a pure experiment, not yet a settled recommendation.

Turn general feedback into specific feedback. When feedback you received doesn't add up to anything actionable, talk it through with an AI, a use also described on Leadership Explored, episode 8, working out what was probably meant and what a next step could look like. It moves feedback from general to something you can actually use. Treat what it comes back with as an informed guess, not a fact: check it against what you actually know before you act on it.

Get a read on yourself from a recording. Feed a recording of a meeting or presentation to an AI and ask what it notices about how you came across (Leadership Explored, episode 8). Only do this with recordings you have consent to share, especially when a colleague or direct report is on the recording too. A rougher, earlier substitute for the kind of feedback a mentor or coach gives by watching you directly.

None of these replace the actual conversation, or a real second opinion from a colleague or a coach.

10. This is a fit question, not a recipe

The shape above is a strong default. Where you personally sit against it, and what that's costing, is what the Engineering Ways of Working Diagnostic is built to find.