

THANKS FOR THE FEEDBACK

The Science and Art of
Receiving Feedback Well

Melissa McNeil, MD

Receiving Feedback

- We all say we want feedback, but do we really?
- Have you ever received feedback you thought was unfair? If so, what did you do?
- Common responses:
 - Argue the “truth” of the feedback”
 - Dismiss it as without merit
 - Assume the giver of the feedback has no credibility
- Rare response:
 - Listen for the truth however painful it may be

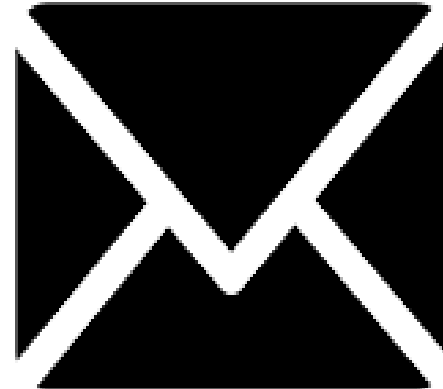
Current Conondrum



- My colleague and I run a Women's Leadership Book Club for first and second-year medical students
- The premise of the book club is that while there are certainly systemic issues in gender advancement, there are skills that women can develop that improve their chances of being seen, heard, and achieving academic advancement
- The goal of the book club is individual skill development—communications strategies, self promotion, etc and we have been very clear about this
- After the first three sessions we received the following email:

Email from a First Year Student

- I hope this email finds you well. I wanted to write to you to share some thoughts and reflections I have had on the Women in Leadership and Medicine book club. I have really appreciated this mini-elective and the work that you and Dr. McNeil have put into this course.



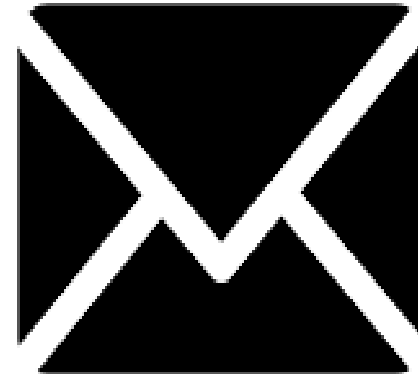
The Suggestions

- **More recent readings.** The books we have read thus far were published a while ago, and some of its content seems less relevant given more recent events (e.g. 2016 election) that have illustrated that there are systemic features that can inhibit women's progress, no matter how confident or well-versed she is in her skillsets. Although we certainly understand there is power in individual growth, we think these topics would be a little more digestible if there was at least some acknowledgement in our readings of these systemic issues.



The Suggestions

- **Connecting our discussions to current events.** Building off this first point, while it is great to talk about theoretical situations, there are many things actively happening, both in our personal lives and in the world at large, related to the topics we cover in this course, and we think more specific and intentional connections to these current events would enhance our ability to understand them and apply them to our lives.



More Suggestions

- **Lived experiences and perspectives from other women in medicine (and women in leadership in general).** We so appreciate Dr. McNeil and you being willing to share some of their personal experiences, and this aspect of the course would be greatly enhanced by exposing us to more perspectives.
- **Mixed media (e.g Ted Talks).** Books are wonderful, but there are also lots of other ways in which people communicate and teach about women in leadership. Some Ted Talks that may be good references and could be drawn in for discussion: https://www.ted.com/playlists/723/how_to_nurture_brilliant_women_in_stem.
- **Better targeting men to participate in this mini-elective.** This year, every single person in the book club is a woman. The conversations we are having are so incredibly important for women *and* men. We think diversifying the participants in this mini-elective would benefit all who participated in these discussions.
- **Changing our next session to an open dialogue on what the rest of the year should look like.** Some of these suggestions could be implemented immediately, and we would really love the opportunity to be involved in planning the remainder of the course together, if you and Dr. McNeil are willing to be flexible.

Thoughts?



Appropriate?



Tone vs content?



Their agenda vs ours?



How would you respond?

Initial Responses

From Dr. Merriam

Oh. My. I just got an infuriating email from a medical student about our mini-elective. I forwarded it to you. Maybe we can talk before I respond so I don't email from the basement. Wow.

From Me

Oh. My. Just read it. At this moment I am in the basement. I feel like just bagging it.

After some reflection we remembered we were giving the Thanks for the Feedback Workshop for our residents the next day.....

Feedback



- We have all grown up receiving endless feedback
 - We are graded, rated, ranked
 - We are coached, screened and scored
 - We are picked first, picked last, not picked at all
- Giving good feedback is tough; receiving it is tougher
 - It's unfair
 - The timing is bad
 - Who does this person think they are?
 - They don't understand
- We are left feeling unappreciated, demotivated and indignant

The Conundrum

- When we give feedback, we notice that the receiver isn't good at receiving
- When we receive feedback, we notice that the giver isn't good at giving feedback



The Problem With Feedback

- Comment from a spouse. . . .
- I don't like the way those pants look on you. . .
- What did the spouse mean?



Feedback

- Comment from a spouse. . . .
- I don't like the way those pants look on you. . .
- What did the spouse mean?
 - Is there something wrong with a pair of pants?
 - Was that a passive-aggressive reference to the weight I've gained?
 - Another dig about how I'm living in the past?
 - Are you trying to help me look nice for the party?

What is Feedback?



- Feedback includes any information you get about yourself
- It's how we learn about ourselves from our experiences and from other people—how we learn about life
- Feedback is not just what gets ranked—it is what gets thanked, commented on, invited back, or dropped
- Feedback can be formal, informal, direct or implied
- *If we are serious about growth and improvement, we have no choice but to get good at learning from just about anyone and everyone!*

Feedback

So feedback is good for you. . . .

- But is it good for you like a birthday gift?
- Or good for you like a colonoscopy?

While we desire to learn and improve, we also long to be loved, accepted, and respected just as we are

The very fact of feedback suggests that how we are is not quite okay. . . .
.. So we bristle. . . .

Important to remember that receiving feedback sits at the intersection of two needs. . . . drive to learn and the longing for acceptance

Receiving Feedback Well

- There is a lot each of us can do to reduce the tension
- The ability to *receive feedback well is not an inborn trait but a skill that can be cultivated*
- We can all get better at receiving feedback
- Remember, receiving feedback well doesn't mean you have to take the feedback; receiving it well means engaging in the conversation skillfully and making thoughtful choices about what to do with the information you receive

Understanding Feedback

- First challenge in understanding feedback is that we often don't know what the purpose of feedback is when given
- Feedback can mean a number of things—a pat on the back is feedback as is a dressing down
- Helpful pointers are feedback and so is getting voted off the island
- First agenda is to determine the type of feedback that is being given



Types of Feedback



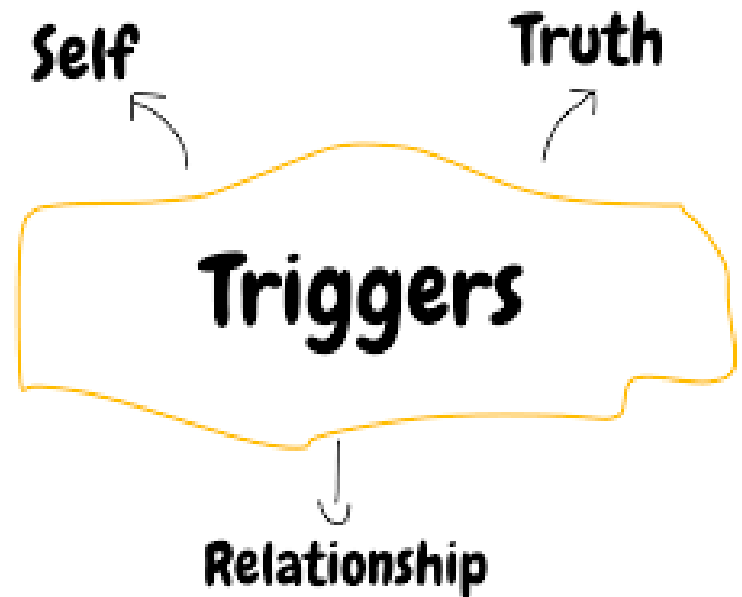
- Feedback comes in three main forms:
 - **Appreciation**—thanks
 - **Coaching**—what you need to do to get better
 - **Evaluation**—here's where you stand
- The receiver often wants or hears one kind of feedback which is different from the feedback that the giver actually meant to give

Hearing and Receiving Feedback

- First take home message: Know what you want, AND know what you're getting. The match matters!
- First step is to understand the emotions that ***feedback triggers*** and to understand how they become ***obstacles to hearing and learning*** from feedback

Feedback Triggers

- Triggered reactions are not obstacles because they are necessarily unreasonable
- They are obstacles because they *keep us from engaging skillfully in the conversation*
- Receiving feedback well is a process of sorting and filtering—of learning how the other person sees things
- It is about trying on ideas that at first seem a poor fit; It is about **keeping that parts that feel right and discarding the parts of the feedback that in the end seem off or are not what you need right now**



Three Feedback Triggers

Truth Triggers

- Set off by the substance of the feedback
- It is off, unhelpful, or simply untrue
- Response is to feel indignant, wronged, exasperated

Relationship Triggers

- Triggered by the particular person giving the feedback
- The feedback is colored by the relationship between giver and receiver
- Focus shifts from the feedback to the audacity of the giver

Identity Triggers

- Identity triggers are about us
- Something about the feedback causes our identity to become undone; we are threatened and undone

The Story of Kip and Nancy

- Kip and Nancy work for an organization that recruits talent for sought after jobs overseas
- Nancy tells Kip that he seems biased against candidates with non-traditional backgrounds. Nancy says that his bias is “seeping through” during the interviews
- Kip dismisses the feedback because “he does not have a bias”; in fact, although Nancy is not aware of it, Kip himself does not have a traditional background. . .
- As far as Kip can tell, the feedback is simply wrong

Truth Triggers

You say: That's wrong, that's not helpful

- First, understand. . . . Shift from “that’s wrong” to TELL ME MORE
- Feedback labels are vague and confusing
- The giver has information we don’t (and vice versa)
- We each interpret things differently

You say: That's not me

- See your blind spots; discover how you come across
- We cannot see ourselves or hear our tone of voice
- We need others to help us see ourselves and our impact on those around us

The Story of Kip and Nancy

- But Kip eventually asks Nancy to ***clarify her feedback***
- Nancy replies: When you interview traditional candidates, you describe the job and its challenges and see how they respond. With non traditional candidates, you just chat about their travels with the merchant marine. ***You're not taking them seriously.***
- Kip now understands where Nancy is coming from and responds: I do take them seriously. I am just looking for different things. . . .
- They had a conversation and each heard the other. . . .

The Story of Miriam and Mark

- Mark and Miriam return from the bar mitzvah of Mark's nephew. Mark tells Miriam that she should not be so aloof when she is with his relatives.
- She responds: Do you know what I went through just to get to that bar mitzvah? The party for your nephew whose name you cannot even remember???
- What's going on with Miriam?

Relationship Triggers

You say: After all I've done for you? Who are you to say these things to me?

- Step back to see the relationship between the giver and receiver
- The way out is to disentangle the relationship from the issues and to discuss each separately
- We hardly ever do this. . . We go right to the relationship issue and let the feedback drop
- The topic of “who” defeats the topic of “what” and the original feedback is blocked

The Story of Miriam and Mark

- Clearly there are multiple issues here
- Miriam feels unappreciated in the relationship
- HOWEVER, if the conversation immediately goes to the relationship issues, the concern that Mark is expressing that Miriam comes across as aloof to his family will remain unheard
- BOTH issues deserve to be discussed—but they are separate and each needs the space for discussion

Identity Triggers


Identity is the story we tell ourselves about who we are



When critical feedback is incoming, that story is under attack and our security alarm sounds



Before the giver gets out their second sentence we gear up to counterattck or pass out



The response can range from minor agitation to profound destabilization

Remember Our Initial Case



The course directors were frustrated! There are lots of triggers at play—certainly truth triggers (they are wrong; We know what they need to learn). There were relationship issues at play (who are these first year medical students to be giving us this feedback? Don't we deserve some respect? Don't they know how wise and experienced we are?)



But potentially the biggest barrier to hearing feedback is the inability for us to even remotely conceive that we were not providing a useful product—this feedback was so counter to our self-image that we remain baffled about what to do.

Identity Triggers

You say: I screw up everything; I'm doomed; I'm not a bad person. Or am I?

- Learn how wiring affects how we hear feedback
 - Wide variation in the reaction to positive and negative feedback; extreme reactions color our sense of self
- Dismantle distortions: see feedback at “actual size”
 - Work to correct distorted thinking and regain balance
- Cultivate a growth identity: Sort toward coaching
 - Remember, challenge is the fasted track to growth

Strategies for Receiving Feedback



FIRST: Seek to Understand



Before you can tell if feedback is right or wrong, you have to understand it



Feedback often comes with generic labels

Be more proactive
Be more assertive
Have more confidence



Shift from “that’s wrong” to “tell me more”



The “what was heard” versus the “what was meant” mismatch is surprisingly common

Strategies for Receiving Feedback



To fully understand feedback, you need to discuss both where it is coming from and where it is going to



Where feedback is coming from means:

What data support the feedback?
How was the data analyzed and interpreted?



Where feedback is going to means:

What advice is being given?
What consequences are there from the feedback?



Remember to ask what is different between you and the feedback giver with regard to:

The data we are looking at
Our interpretations and implicit rules

What if You Still Disagree?



You may well get to the point of fully understanding where feedback is coming from and still simply disagree



While this may be frustrating, from a communication standpoint you have succeeded—the goal is for you to understand the feedback giver's position and for them to understand your position



Be transparent and honest about your reaction

Wow, that's upsetting to hear
I would never have imagined that
That is so far from how I see myself

Take Home Messages

We all have blind spots because we:

- Cannot see our own faces
- Cannot hear our tone of voice
- Are unaware of even big patterns of behavior

Blind spots are amplified by:

- Emotional math: we discount our emotions while others count them double
- Attribution: we attribute our failure to the situation while others attribute it to our character
- Impact-Intent Gap: we judge ourselves by our intentions, while others judge us by our impact on them

Take Home Messages

To see ourselves and our blind spots we need help from others through feedback

Invite others to be an honest mirror to help you see yourself in the moment

Remember, feedback is about looking forward not looking back—reality remains in the eye of the beholder

Ask: How am I getting in my own way????

The Source

Thanks for the Feedback

By

Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

Harvard Negotiation Project

Case Study

You are a new program director. You have been in your position for a little less than a year. You love your job—it is exciting, you think you are making a difference, you have wonderful associate program directors and chief medical residents. You feel valued and appreciated and that you are making a difference.

You are extremely busy. You are on several national committees and have lots of travel commitments; everyone seems to want a piece of you, and you have two small children.

Case Study

You are finishing up a busy day. Your plan is to meet with your chief residents and then head over to the long planned intern selection committee meeting. You are excited because this will be “your big show”—the first intern selection committee meeting you are running. These will be “your” first interns.

You arrive for the meeting with your chief residents, and suddenly the day loses its glamour. Your chiefs are angry. They were supposed to meet with you on Monday and you stood them up. You apologize, telling them that on your calendar this meeting was moved to today because the chief of medicine needed to see you during the Monday time.

Case Study



The chiefs are not soothed. They unleash a torrent of complaints which include the following:

- You are never available
- You are disrespectful of their time
- You repeatedly reschedule or cancel meetings
- You are scattered and chaotic
- They have problems that they need to discuss with you and they cannot get your attention

You are blind sided—hurt, angry, and feel the tears come. What do you do?