

How to Keep Your Cool During a Performance Review

by Robert M. Galford

JANUARY 13, 2012

While the holiday season may be behind us, the peak season for exchanging gifts and messages is not over. Not by a long shot. For many companies, it's salary and performance review time. It's bonus time. It's profit-sharing time. These anxiety-provoking milestones are filling your organization's calendar even as you read this, and they will continue to do so for at least the next few months. And there is plenty of anxiety to go around, affecting both providers and recipients of such tidings. *What does this signify? What are they telling me here? What does it say about how I am valued?*

For the feedback providers among us, there is ample available advice on how best to proffer messages and to ensure their effective delivery. However, there's far less guidance to help us when we are on the receiving end of these "gifts" (after all, aren't we always hearing how feedback is a gift?).

The purpose of this post is to start a conversation among us, to consider how best to take in the feedback messages we receive – not just at this time of year, but all the time.

Here are four ways to become better at receiving – and implementing – feedback:

1. Relax. Nervous going in? Even a little? Of course you are. There's an imbalance of power, information and preparation from moment one. The providers of your feedback spent at least some time gathering data, synthesizing it, and formulating the message. Even if they prepared it all by themselves, it was probably part of a broader organizational effort involving multiple inputs from a number of people. And you? You're going in with none of that information. Given that imbalance, why would you possibly expect not to be even a little nervous? Give yourself a break. Relax. Unless you're already in trouble, there will be no trapdoor under your chair.

2. Prepare yourself to hear one or more unexpected “somethings”

- a. Something you did or didn't do, that you had no idea was even on the radar screen as a factor or an issue.
- b. Something that was a bigger deal than you thought. Or a smaller one. And the consequences or impact in the feedback message seems disproportionate.
- c. Something that could or should have been addressed with you weeks or months earlier.
- d. Something that you thought had already been resolved or improved upon.

3. If you don't agree with the feedback, don't launch into a defense right away. As you listen, hold that thought and hold your tongue! Force yourself not to form a conclusion or communicate a response too quickly, and maybe not even in the course of the conversation. You've spent zero time on absorbing and interpreting the data at this point. Apply the following filters:

- a. Put it in absolute context first. Even if you are disappointed that it's not the biggest bonus ever, or you didn't “Exceed Expectations” in every category, or you discover your nemesis received the equivalent of the Nobel Prize, what's the summary message to you? Is it more valid than not? More positive than negative? Was it mostly on-target?
- b. Figure out how to use what you have heard. As a result of this feedback, do you know what you can or should do the same or differently going forward?

While a few on-the-spot questions are OK, finding your own version of “I'm guessing it's OK for me to come back to you if I have more questions” is a better approach.

4. When it's over:

- a. Thank them sincerely for their time and thoughts, regardless of whether you were thrilled with their message or their delivery. Unless they were bored or rude, it required some work on their part.
- b. Reflect on the overall message, and what it conveyed. If you are contemplating a campaign to prove you were right on some specific point, consider that it might ultimately be more helpful to focus on the broader takeaway and what it will require to do as well or better next time.
- c. Don't just file it and forget it. Look at it again in a few months, and see how you're doing.

Finally, remember this was but a single piece or episode of feedback. If you're lucky, you'll receive many more.

Now, what's your feedback on receiving feedback?



Robert M. Galford, managing partner of the Center for Leading Organizations, is a leadership fellow in executive education at the Harvard Graduate School of Design and coauthor of *Simple Sabotage: A Modern Field Manual for Detecting & Rooting Out Everyday Behaviors That Undermine Your Workplace* (HarperOne, 2015).

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