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WORK & FAMILY

The Rare Workers Who Thrive on Negative Feedback

Strivers seek out constructive criticism on the job, viewing it as a necessary way to shore up their weaknesses



ILLUSTRATION: CAROLE HÉNAFF



By *Sue Shellenbarger*

Sept. 11, 2018 9:23 a.m. ET

Many people hate getting negative feedback and avoid dishing it out too, fearing it will spark anger, dejection or even tears.

But some people actually want and even seek out criticism at work. Who are these people?

Recent research sheds light on their inner life. People who thrive on feedback tend to be strivers who believe they can improve their skills and abilities. They've embraced personal goals so compelling that they see criticism as a tool for helping reach them, rather than a setback. They have close friends at work, and they also tend to be strong on both self-control and self-awareness.

Sales trainer Cheri Spets Farmer says she realized years ago that her colleagues noticed her shortcomings before she did. She recalls struggling in a new sales job and asking a co-worker, "What do you think I'm doing wrong?" Ms. Farmer was surprised when her colleague, without thinking, immediately told her to focus more on selling the company's special promotions.

"That was my lightbulb moment," says Ms. Farmer, who owns her own Columbia, S.C., sales-training consulting firm. She realized that if you don't ask, you may be the last person to see your own weaknesses. She has requested critiques from colleagues and clients ever since.

It's natural to resist criticism. Some people feel so threatened by a critical appraisal that they start avoiding the colleague who delivered it, a recent Harvard Business School working paper shows.

"The difference between the highly self-aware and the rest of us is that they push through that discomfort and ask for feedback anyway," says Tasha Eurich, an organizational psychologist and author of "Insight," a book on self-awareness.



Cheri Spets Farmer, a Columbia, S.C., sales consultant, often asks colleagues and employees for negative feedback. She has learned that others typically see her shortcomings before she does, so she might as well ask them to tell her about them.
PHOTO: GEORGE HERRON

People who take criticism well are often fortified by a belief that they can get smarter and better at their job through effort, according to a 2017 study co-wrote by Kris Byron, an associate professor in managerial science at Georgia State University. Those who see intelligence as a fixed trait they can't change are more likely to feel threatened if their manager doesn't provide the affirmation they desire.

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Christopher Molivadas often asks his bosses what he can do better. If they respond that he's doing fine, he pushes for specifics. "You have to really probe for feedback and let them know that you welcome it," says Mr. Molivadas, a regional market director in Washington, D.C., for JLL, a real estate services firm. When he was told at one point that he got too focused on details and didn't spend enough time on big-picture problems, he set out to learn about strategic thinking. He read books, asked subordinates for feedback and worked with a coach, Tim Allard.

"The guy is a learning machine," says Mr. Allard, co-owner of Odyssey Inc., a Charlottesville, Va., business and executive consulting firm. People who seek negative feedback "want to be the best version of themselves. They're internally motivated to grow," Mr. Allard says.

People who have close ties with others at work tend to seek tougher reviews, and to make changes in response, according to a 2017 study led by Stacey Finkelstein, assistant professor of marketing at Baruch College in New York.

Brian Binke, president and CEO of Birmingham Group, a Berkley, Mich., executive search firm, has formed longstanding friendships with several other search-firm owners. "We challenge each other to do better," Mr. Binke says. When he asked recently for feedback on how he was

managing costs, his colleagues' critique led him to change how he assigned duties to some staffers.

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Mr. Binke sees the criticism not as a put-down, but as a vote of confidence—as if his friends were saying, “I know if you just put your mind to it, you can fix this,” he says.

Experts in their fields tend to be motivated by criticism, and to see it as a sign of how well they're progressing toward their goals, according to a 2011 study co-wrote by Dr. Finkelstein. Novices are more likely to seek praise, and to interpret it as a sign of whether to remain committed to the goals they've set, the study shows.

Robin Camarote was stung recently by a potential partner's heated critique of a proposal she'd written. The broadside left her shaken. But it also motivated her to redouble her energy and focus, says Ms. Camarote, a Falls Church, Va., communication and change-management consultant.

“There's that little sting, that feeling of, ‘I'll show you,’” she says. When she later received positive feedback on the proposal from a mentor, she realized the criticism had been more useful, says Ms. Camarote, author of “Flock,” a book on leadership.

WHEN YOU GET NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

- Stay calm and listen
- Say thanks for the feedback
- Take time afterward to recover if needed
- Reflect on the criticism when you feel ready to do so
- If you don't understand it, ask a trusted colleague for help
- Decide whether changing is worth the effort
- Make specific plans for changing your behavior

Dr. Eurich recommends taking time to reflect on criticism before responding.

Loni Freeman was startled when her boss on her first job out of college years ago said she often interrupted others and finished their sentences for them. She denied it, but he insisted she did. She ran the critique by a friend, and when he agreed with her boss, Ms. Freeman resolved to start listening more carefully to others.

“That was a turning point for me,” says Ms. Freeman, vice president, human resources for SSPR, a public-relations agency in Colorado Springs, Colo. “It was a bit hurtful, but I also saw how much I grew.”

Managers can help employees by setting an example and asking for feedback themselves, says Rachel Ernst, a vice president at Reflektive, a San Francisco performance-management company.

Giving appraisals early in the day, when employees' self-control hasn't been depleted by fatigue or stress, may improve the chances of their taking it well, according to a 2016 study led by Rachel Ruttan, an assistant professor of organizational behavior at the University of Toronto.

Managers also should stress employees' ability to learn and change, according to a 2018 study by Elissa Adame, an assistant research professor at Arizona State University. Rather than telling them not to make any mistakes, consider saying, “I'm giving you these comments because I have high expectations of you, and I know you can reach them.”

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Appeared in the September 12, 2018, print edition as 'The Rare Workers Who Thrive on Negative Feedback When You Get Negative Feedback.'

 WORK & FAMILY MAILBOX

Q: I enjoyed your Aug. 28 column on sleep training. So many parents have this problem and try so many methods that don't seem to work. Did you encounter any advice on retraining toddlers once they learn to climb out of the crib? —*E.S.*

A: Even children who have been sleeping well develop a will of their own by this stage and rebel against bedtime routines. Many parents try what they call a silent return to sleep: Gently pick your child up and place him back in the bed or crib in a bland, emotionless way, without speaking, cuddling, scolding or explaining to him that everyone needs sleep. This keeps him from popping out of bed because he wants more social contact.

The child's behavior may worsen for a while, but if you do this consistently, most children learn there's no benefit to getting out of bed. Some parents use a crib tent to prevent wandering. Some children learn to enjoy the comfort of these enclosed spaces.

For a helpful approach to setting up and enforcing sleep rules for children of all ages, see "Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child," by Marc Weissbluth, an emeritus professor of clinical pediatrics at Northwestern University. Also, check out the website of Craig Canapari, director of the Yale Pediatric Sleep Center and a pediatrician at Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital in New Haven, Conn., at dr craiganapari.com. Other helpful books include "The Happiest Baby on the Block," by Harvey Karp; "Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems," by Richard Ferber, and "The Sleep Lady's Good Night Sleep Tight," by Kim West.

Q: I was interested to see in your column on sleep training a doctor's recommendation that parents talk with their pediatricians about problems getting their babies to sleep. Don't parents do this? —*S.D.*

A: Most parents do discuss sleep problems with their pediatricians. A doctor's exam is essential in ruling out potential medical causes of sleep problems, and pediatricians often provide helpful sleep-training advice. But many parents say that while pediatricians are typically concerned and encouraging, they're often too busy to address specific questions, and the advice they offer tends to be general in nature.

Solving sleep issues often requires weighing a variety of factors and making several changes at once, such as altering nap and feeding schedules, establishing new bedtime routines or equipping the nursery with room-darkening shades or white-noise machines. That's why many parents turn for help to coaches who can discuss household routines, babies' behavior and potential solutions in detail, or to books that can address a range of problems.

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