

# Feedback: The Whole Truth (Almost)

*By Mary Jo Asmus*

Most good leaders appreciate feedback. They want to know how they are doing in the eyes of their stakeholders, and appreciate honest suggestions on what and how they can improve. Many believe that when they request feedback from their staff, peers, and manager that they will hear the unvarnished truth about their performance; seldom does that happen.

I encourage my clients to ask for feedback from others. Sometimes, I'm the one who has to break the bad news that unless certain conditions are right, they will NOT hear the whole truth. Even if the conditions are right, they still may not. This doesn't mean that they should stop asking for feedback, it means that they just need to be aware that they may not get the full story from others.

This may have nothing to do with the leader who is asking; but it may have a lot to do with the fact that the leader is in a position of power. Or, it may be because the climate of the organization makes it hard for employees to feel comfortable giving their honest opinion. However, there are some things that you can do to provide the best chance of getting quality feedback when you ask for it.

**Become calm and consistent in your behavior:** Leaders who are volatile and “go off” without warning create fear. If you are this type of person, be aware that the messengers around you are afraid of being shot. Your chances of getting honest feedback are nil unless you change your behavior and become more calm and consistent in your responses.

**Set the stage ahead of time** with the person(s) you'd like feedback from. Ask them if they will observe you and provide feedback; let them know that this is important to you and you will treat their feedback seriously. If you wish, ask them to pay particular attention to a specific behavior you'd like them to observe.

**Be specific** about how you phrase the question when you ask for someone's comments. With the right question, you will get a specific response. Instead of “How am I doing?” try, “What did you observe me doing when I requested the input the team gave on our new budgeting process?” and “Is there anything that I could have done better when I asked for the input?”

**Accept responsibility** for the feedback you hear. You may not agree, but what you heard is a perception of the person providing it. So even if you don't agree, seriously consider what you will do to change the perception. Making excuses for your behavior will not foster future honest feedback.

**Express gratitude** to the person who gave you the feedback, no matter how hard it was to hear. You've been given a gift that will help you to be better at what you do. Listening to feedback is hard, but it is essential to your success. Feedback can be encouraged if you are willing to prepare for it and accept it with grace.