

ACCEPTING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

By Beverly Smallwood

Openness to learn about yourself is essential if you are to grow and develop. It is especially important if you hope to lead and influence others. As a person of influence, you set the tone for the communication styles of co-workers. If you are defensive or if you portray a "know-it-all" attitude, that style will be contagious within the ranks.

To become more open to feedback, form these five habits:

1. Be ever aware of signals from others that answer the question, "What's it like to be on the other side of me?" We often judge others by their actions, while we judge ourselves by our intentions. Despite our good intentions, we often come across in ways that are offensive or unhelpful to others. When this happens, shouldn't we want to know it so that we can change it?

2. Demonstrate an eagerness to learn about yourself by inviting feedback.

Some are afraid of what they will hear if they do this. However, managers who not only conduct appraisals of employees, but also ask employees to tell them how they can perform better enjoy greater respect. Team members who ask co-workers or bosses how they can improve inspire more cooperation and grace.

3. Realize that even unfairly negative criticism often contains a grain of truth.

It would be much more palatable if all feedback were delivered constructively. However, we sometimes don't have that luxury. Even then, we may be able to learn from what the person is saying. Though there may have been some misperceptions or distortions, ask yourself, "What can I learn here about how my actions are perceived, and how can I improve my communications or behavior so that I accomplish the goals more effectively?"

4. Fight the tendency to be defensive.

This is a tough one. Defensiveness can be expressed in words (e.g., "You don't understand"; or "But...") or in nonverbal signals (e.g., angry facial expression; tight lips; or folded arms, which, by the way, can mean other things like you're cold!). It's hard not to show it when you don't like or don't agree with what you hear. Remember, though, that if you keep an open mindset, which will show up in your behavior, you're apt to learn something you can use to continue to grow.

5. Don't condemn yourself or let others condemn you.

It's one thing to focus on a specific behavior that can be improved. It's another to feel generally ineffective or bad as a person. In the latter case, you may become discouraged to the point that you don't feel like trying. You may feel paralyzed, believing that it's no use, that you're a hopeless case. This is not true! Keep your focus on specific ways that you can sharpen your skills and improve your habits. Specific, achievable goals are motivating.

A continuously-improving organization is made up of continuously-improving people. Lead the way by tuning in to feedback that allows you to become better and better in your ability to relate to people and get the right things done.