



How to handle negative feedback in your career

By Associated Press business staff

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NEW YORK (AP) -- Whether it's a bad performance review or an unexpected scolding from the boss, negative feedback hits workers squarely in the ego.

It's never easy to hear that something is wrong with your work, your behavior or both. And maybe the criticism is unwarranted or unfair. But becoming angry or argumentative, which many people do, will only make matters worse.

Career consultants say there are ways to deal calmly with negative comments from the boss, and to turn painful feedback into a positive for your job and your career.

PUT YOUR EMOTIONS ON HOLD

When most people get negative feedback, their immediate reaction is to protect or defend themselves, said BJ Gallagher, a workplace consultant and author of "It's Never Too Late to Be What You Might Have Been." Workers want to prove the bosses wrong and convince them how hard they really work.

The key is to avoid those emotions, Gallagher said. Going on the defensive will only make you look uncooperative, get your boss angry and you won't get anything accomplished.

Instead, Gallagher recommended "throwing a circuit breaker" on your emotions and coming into any meeting with the intent to learn.

STEP BY STEP SUGGESTIONS

Keeping some of these recommendations in mind will help you get through the difficult period after the feedback lands.

-- Try to just take in the information. But do ask yourself, "Is this true? Am I doing something I'm not aware of? Or is the boss just in a bad mood?"

-- Ask questions. Make sure your boss gives you examples of the times when your performance wasn't up to par. Rumors fly in offices, and the feedback may not necessarily be accurate. If the boss says he or she hears that you're frequently late or have a negative attitude toward certain tasks, ask for specific instances.

But even if the boss can't give you details, don't dismiss the feedback out of hand. Think of ways you can make the situation better.

-- Say thank you. It may sound trite, Gallagher said, but "a complaint is really a gift."

"It means (the boss) still cares enough to tell you how to improve," she said. "Negative feedback is better than no feedback."

-- Give your boss a "mission statement" that shows your commitment to improving your performance, recommends Joseph Grenny, author of "Crucial Confrontations." Say what you'll do to resolve the problems with your work.

-- Schedule another meeting. Asking for a chance to review your work again shows initiative and lets the boss know you want to do better.

More importantly, though, the next sit-down will give the boss a chance to see that your work or attitude has improved. All too often, Grenny said, bosses hold on to negative thoughts about an employee although

the worker is doing better.

FORMAL REVIEWS

"A performance review is everybody's worst headache," Gallagher said. "The feedback can be painful and frustrating, even if you know it's coming."

Gallagher said most organizations handle performance reviews poorly, and don't always take the best interests of the employee into account. But you can try to make the process more constructive:

-- Do a self-appraisal. Even if your boss doesn't ask for one, do one anyway. It might open up more communication, Gallagher said, and you'll be able to point out things you don't agree with in the formal report.

-- Use "I" language rather than "you" language in your response to the review, and focus on what you're going to do. That will help you stay away from accusations and avoid putting the boss on the defensive. Example: "I will try to update you about what I'm working on more frequently," rather than "You need to communicate better."

-- Avoid right and wrong. You won't make things better if you blame the boss. Instead, use active statements that show you're listening, such as: "Clearly, this isn't working for you. It isn't working for me, either. Let's focus on ways to make this better."

IS IT YOU, OR IS EVERYONE?

Managers can sometimes be prejudiced against workers, and build a case against employees they don't like, said Leigh Branham, owner of the human resources consulting firm Keeping The People Inc.

"We're promoting people into management that don't really fit," Branham said. "They're good with data, but often not good with people."

But, on the other hand, be careful you don't have a victim mentality.

Talk to your peers, and try to find out if they're in a similar situation with the boss. It may be that your company is changing the way it works, and that many employees, including you, are having a hard time adapting and that the boss is putting pressure on everyone.

THE NEXT STEP

So you've been handed a bad review or a big dose of criticism. But what if, after a lot of reflection, you believe the problem just isn't there or is your boss' fault?

If he or she treats everyone else well and is harsh on you, there's a chance that the relationship between you and the boss is simply broken, Gallagher said. Just like any relationship, there are some boss-employee pairings that just don't work.

If you get the sense you're not going to win the battle with your boss, you do have some options, including reaching out to human resources for mediation. You can appeal your review or file a grievance. If it's feasible, apply for a transfer.

Or, as a last result, you can quit -- but that's not something people take lightly in this economy.

"People are more willing to put up with more abuse now in this tight job market," Gallagher said. "It's like that old saying, 'the devil you know is better than the devil you don't.'"

But if you don't see things improving, quitting just might be the only solution. A stressful work environment can lead to all sorts of problems including sleep loss and digestion issues, Gallagher said.

And it pays for bosses to consider an employee's personal well-being, too. In her research, Gallagher has found that the No. 1 reason for absenteeism is a bad relationship with a boss.

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