

It's Not Me, It's You!



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One of my favorite parts of the Seinfeld episode titled “The Lip Reader,” is when Gwen tries to soften her break-up with George by saying, “It’s not you, it’s me.” George responds, “You’re giving me the ‘It’s not you, it’s me’ routine? I invented ‘It’s not you, it’s me.’ Nobody tells me it’s them, not me. If it’s anybody, it’s me.” Gwen’s exasperated answer? “Alright, George, it’s you.”

This very funny exchange came to mind this week as I read “[Find the Coaching in Criticism](#),” in the January-February issue of the [Harvard Business Review](#). The article is written by Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone, coauthors of a forthcoming book titled “Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well.”

Despite all of the work that has been done in the field of performance management—including discarding the terms “annual review,” and “performance appraisal,” the fact is that many organizations deserve a failing grade when it comes to providing formal and informal feedback to staff. Citing some pretty troubling statistics, the authors explain that, to date, efforts to improve this area within HR have focused almost exclusively on the *giving feedback* side of the table. Countless training programs (I’ve actually designed and delivered a few!), coaching sessions, books, online tools and more have been created to help managers improve their “skills” when it comes to providing constructive feedback to direct reports. Yet the results of this massive investment haven’t paid off. How badly are we doing?

According to Heen and Stone:

- only 36% of managers complete performance reviews thoroughly and on time
- 55% of employees said that their most recent performance review was unfair or inaccurate, and
- one in four employees say that they dread performance reviews more than anything else at work!

So if managerial coaching isn’t the solution to this weakness, for dare I say MOST nonprofits, what’s the answer? In [Find the Coaching in Criticism](#), Heen and Stone say, in essence, that “it’s not me, it’s you.” Their research suggests that what employers need to do is spend a lot more time *helping employees become better receivers of critical feedback*.

My favorite tip in the collection of six steps to “becoming a better receiver” is titled “Know your tendencies.” In this section, the authors assert that knowing how you generally respond to feedback is the first step to becoming a better receiver. How do most of us respond to feedback? A few examples include:

- Being defensive or argumentative about the facts
- Taking issue with the way in which the feedback was delivered
- Accepting the feedback when delivered, only to deny its validity later on
- Being initially unimpressed, only to realize later that the feedback may make sense after all

This particular tip reminded me of the very common and familiar responses to new risk management approaches, strategies and policies. Too often, knee-jerk or emotion-laden responses to a new idea puts the new policy at risk of a quick demise. Instead of obsessively focusing on how we deliver new risk guidance, perhaps we need to shift our balance to helping staff and volunteers find the benefit in sound risk management. Instead of blaming ourselves or questioning the validity, necessity or ultimate value of a new risk requirement, maybe we should turn the tables and think of ways to help the staff and volunteers we need for our mission, become the best possible receivers and users of new risk management.

“Know your tendencies” hit a personal nerve for me as well. During my career there have been several (I’m being kind to myself here) instances where I rejected feedback upon receipt, only to realize months and even years later that the feedback was spot on. One example was the board member who suggested in 1998 that the Center relocate to a suburb. It took me ten years to appreciate the wisdom in that suggestion!

If you haven’t already read “[Find the Coaching in Criticism](#),” the insights in the article are well worth the price of admission for this issue of [HBR](#). In addition to helping you identify ways to address weaknesses in your nonprofit’s current performance management system, I hope the article inspires you to help staff learn to overcome hard-wired resistance and embrace the mission-advancing benefits of risk management.

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