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## From the Director

# The Gift of Feedback

By Michele Mattoon, NSRF® Director, NSRF National Facilitator, and CFG® Coach in Indiana, [michele@nsrfharmony.org](mailto:michele@nsrfharmony.org)

*This is the conclusion of a two-part series begun in the May 2013 issue of **Connections**, entitled **How to Give Feedback Effectively**. [Follow this link](#) to the May issue to review that article.*

Studies have shown that the most stressful situation for many people is standing up in front of a group of people to speak. If that is true, then publicly putting forth your work so that others can give you feedback must be a close second. Very few people rest securely in their comfort zone when their peers examine their work with the intent of evaluating or improving it. It's even worse, when it isn't your peers, but people higher on the ladder of the organization.

Why does this situation create such strong feelings of anxiety? One obvious reason is that the majority of us have been on the receiving end of some badly conceived and poorly given feedback. Perhaps the feedback wasn't useful or it was personal instead of referring to the product or action. It might have been given at the wrong time and at the wrong place. Maybe the giver was highly emotional and instead of waiting to calm down, gave the feedback in the heat of the moment. (You get the picture. Insert your own "feedback nightmare" here!)

Another reason receiving feedback is stressful is that it is hard for us to separate ourselves from our work. We often perceive our work as an extension of ourselves. Therefore, our fearful thoughts go something like this: "If my work isn't perfect, then that means I'm not perfect either. And what if I'm not just imperfect, but I'm not even 'good enough'? What if I'm really bad at what I do?" When this line of reasoning is actually written down, it seems a little silly. Yet, if we're honest with ourselves, how many of us have gone down this path?

On the other hand, maybe you are very secure in what you do—in fact, you're known as an expert in your field. One of the reasons you may not want to receive feedback is that you perceive it to be a waste of your time. People wind up giving you suggestions that you've already tried and didn't work or you know they won't work because of the context of the situation. Additionally, you may become impatient with others because they insist on giving you feedback around something that you feel is perfectly fine the way it is instead of the thing that you know could be better. Who wants their entire piece of work pulled apart when they only needed suggestions around one small piece of it?

With all of this in mind, NSRF offers the following suggestions when receiving feedback from others:

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**Before the feedback session begins, target the specific area to be addressed.** We strongly suggest that you frame a focusing question to articulate what exactly you want to get out of the feedback session. The clearer you are about what kind of feedback you want, the more likely you'll get feedback that is helpful to you. Protocol use will ensure that the participants will stick to this one area, and not waste time with feedback that isn't useful.

**Be open to the feedback.** OK, you're putting your work out there for all to examine. You are hoping that participants won't judge you, but help you with areas you clearly state. What's the first thing you should do to make sure that you are open to suggestions? Take a slow, deep breath. That's right. Taking a few slow, mindful breaths will trigger your sympathetic nervous system, lowering the levels of cortisol and other chemicals in your body that add to anxiety and stress. Consciously relaxing clenched muscles in the hands, jaw, shoulders and belly can also be helpful.

**Next, try to listen with curiosity, instead of defensiveness.** If a comment has pushed an emotional button, take a moment to consider why. If you can pinpoint the reason for your emotional reaction, you are closer to being able to depersonalize it. Intentionally adopting a "wondering" attitude as we teach in our protocols can help open doors to the creative part of your brain, which will happily produce new ideas given a chance.

**Don't try to defend yourself or justify your choices when you are given a chance to speak about the feedback.** This is not only a waste of valuable time for you and the participants, but also gives the participants the idea that nothing they said is helpful. Instead, focusing on what was useful not only validates the hard work of the person giving feedback, but also helps you to articulate exactly how you may move forward. Hopefully, the coach has reminded the group that only a fraction of what they say will be useful, which will allow you to let go of the urge to defend yourself, and see them as "helpers" rather than "attackers."

**Clarify and summarize your understanding of the feedback.** When it is your turn to reflect on the feedback that the group has given you, it is important that you take the time to summarize your understanding of it. When you go over your notes, you may want to ask for greater clarification of the feedback at a later time. The end of the feedback session shouldn't be the end of your quest to improve. Touching base with a colleague to pursue a greater understanding of a suggestion can be extremely helpful.

Many people who have brought in work or a professional dilemma for feedback often end the session by sincerely thanking their colleagues for all their help. What a change from leaving a session feeling as if your work was judged and found wanting! At NSRF we are dedicated to giving people the skills and tools necessary to make this shift from seeing feedback as a punishment to valuing it as the gift that it is.



Michele Mattoon  
Director, NSRF

P.S. Talk to us about great and not-great feedback—[email](mailto:nsrf@nsrf.org) us.

