

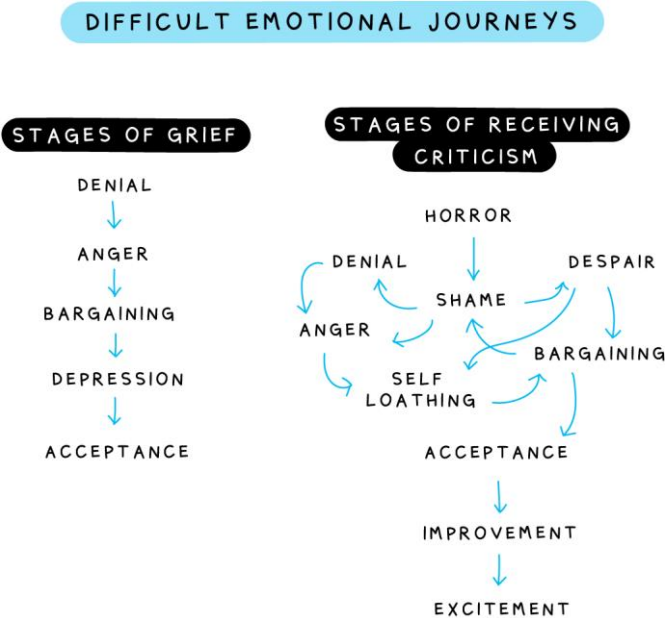
How leaders can get the feedback they need to grow by Kim Scott, Liz Fosslien and Mollie West Duffy. Harvard Business review, March 10, 2023.¹

When uncertainty is high, knowing where you stand — and learning about your mistakes while there’s still time to fix them — is more important than ever. To be able to adapt to changing conditions and ensure that your team continues to feel supported and motivated, you need to understand what you’re doing well — and where you’re falling short. Soliciting clear, actionable feedback allows you to make better, more informed decisions and pivot when necessary.

Asking for feedback also creates a culture of trust and transparency. With concerns about an economic downturn rising, already overwhelmed teams are being asked to do more with less. When employees feel like their input matters, they’re more likely to remain loyal, engaged, and productive. They’re also much more willing to surface valuable concerns and suggestions.

But uncertainty also makes it much, much harder to get honest feedback. When people feel anxious or like their jobs might be in jeopardy, they’re more reticent to speak up, especially to management. Add to that the fact that when people move up the ranks in an organization, they tend to get less corrective feedback, even though a [2014 study by Zenger Folkman](#) showed that by a three-to-one margin, people believe corrective feedback does more to improve their performance than positive feedback.

In other words, right when you need it most, getting an accurate pulse on your performance as a leader becomes really, really hard. So how do you get feedback when people are least likely to offer it? How can you solicit actionable, useful advice from your reports? Neither one of you wants to have a hard conversation, but when you’re the leader, it’s your job to overcome that reluctance for yourself and help the other person overcome it, too.



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Knowing how and when to ask for feedback is a learned skill — as is checking your (normal) defensive reaction in the face of helpful criticism. Based on our books and research, we put our

¹ <https://hbr.org/2023/03/how-leaders-can-get-the-feedback-they-need-to-grow>

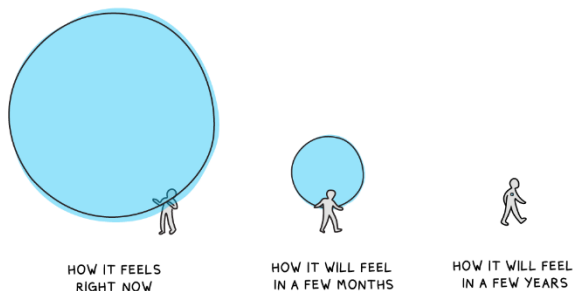
heads together to outline the specific steps leaders should take to ask for feedback. The first thing to do is to [ask for criticism](#), especially if you're the boss. This is awkward at best and can be a difficult emotional journey, so here are six tips for how to successfully [solicit Radical Candor](#) from your employees.

1. Embrace feeling “negative” emotions — often.

Hearing what you need to improve rarely feels good. Ask yourself: How many times each week do the people you work with tell you things that make you anxious, upset, or even defensive? How often do they tell you things that make you feel wonderful? If it's all feel-good praise and no hard-to-hear criticism, beware! You're not getting the real story. You need to work harder to get them to criticize you.

Remember, when it comes to soliciting Radical Candor, good news is no news, no news is bad news, and bad news is good news. As one of Liz's former managers told her, “Someone who cares about you tells you that you have food on your face. Everyone else will stay mum because they don't want to feel uncomfortable.” Even though criticism is hard to hear in the moment, you need it to get better over time — and in time, it will sting less, too.

A REALLY HARD THING



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2. Have a go-to question.

It can be awkward to ask people point blank about what's going on. And when things are uncertain, it can feel risky to them to say what they actually think. We recommend that you come up with a go-to question that establishes psychological safety. There are three elements to a good go-to question:

- The question cannot be answered with a yes or a no, or an “Oh, no, everything is fine” — which is exactly the answer you'll get most of the time if you ask, “Do you have any feedback for me?” Liz and Mollie love, “What one thing can I do to support you?” By asking for “one thing,” you make it much more likely that you'll get a specific, actionable response.
- Your question must sound like you — something you would naturally say. The question Kim likes to use is, “What could I do or stop doing that would make it easier to work with me?” However, if those words don't fall easily off your tongue, find words that do.

- Your question must be adapted for the person you're talking to. Jason Rosoff, who cofounded Radical Candor with Kim, told her he hates her go-to question, so she needs to ask him a more specific one.

Consider making your go-to question a recurring part of your 1:1 agendas. If your team knows what you'll be asking ahead of time, they'll have more time to prepare a useful answer.

3. Embrace the other person's discomfort.

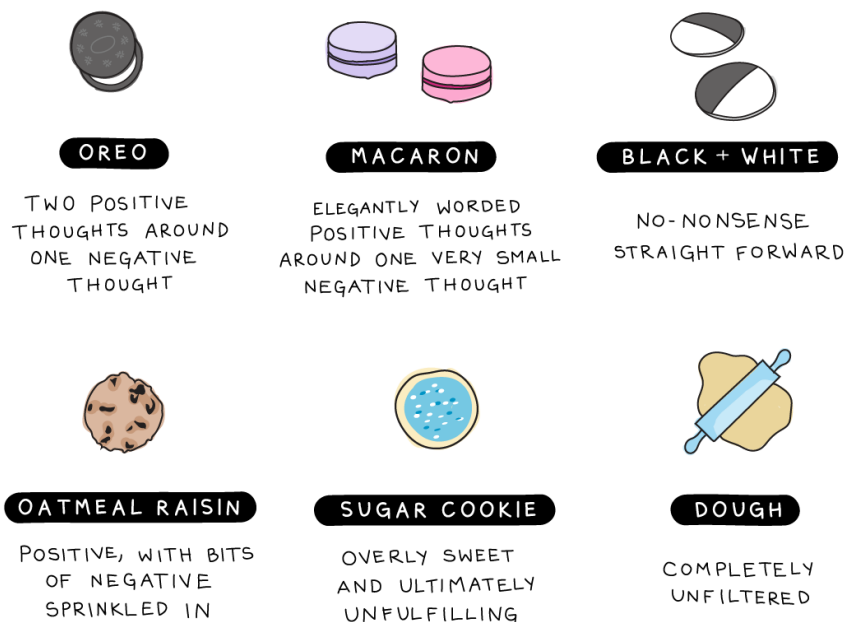
No matter how good your go-to question is, the other person is likely to feel uncomfortable. And you're likely to feel uncomfortable because they're uncomfortable. It can be tempting to let the person off the hook at this point. But if you do that, you'll never get the feedback you need to succeed.

The only way out of this discomfort is through. Try asking your question and then remaining silent. Count to six, slowly, in your head. Very few people can endure six full seconds of silence. They'll tell you something.

4. Listen to understand, not to respond.

When listening to feedback, your motivation matters. You should want to understand what the other person is telling you, rather than listening so that you can deliver a response. It's the difference between, "I hear what you are saying, thank you" (great) and "I hear what you are saying, but..." (not so great).

TYPES OF FEEDBACK



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Feedback opens us up to seeing our behaviors from different points of view. If we're focused on defending ourselves, we lose out on the opportunity to learn and improve. A helpful hint about listening to understand: *look* for the criticism. Often people will hide the criticism. Sometimes

you'll get "oreo" feedback: two positive thoughts around a negative one. (This is sometimes called, less appetizingly, the [shit sandwich](#).) Make sure you don't miss the criticism. Other times the feedback will be more like an oatmeal raisin cookie. Don't miss the raisins!

5. Close the loop: Make your listening tangible.

The best way to ensure you'll continue receiving feedback is to follow up and share the actions you've taken based on what you heard.

When you receive critical comments, it's useful to immediately outline what you'll do with the suggestions or concerns that were flagged. Try, "Here's what I'll do moving forward." And remember: You don't need to promise to make massive changes (you might not be able to deliver on those promises). You can say something like, "My next step will be to talk to other leaders to see what's possible."

Take Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, who gets an annual 360-degree written assessment that any employee can contribute to. Hastings closed the loop on his 2019 360 by writing a memo to all Netflix employees. Here's an excerpt from his book [No Rules Rules](#):

I find the best comments for my growth are unfortunately the most painful. So, in the spirit of 360, thank you for bravely and honestly pointing out to me: "In meetings you can skip over topics or rush through them when you feel impatient or determine a particular topic on the agenda is no longer worth the time...On a similar note, watch out for letting your point-of-view overwhelm. You can short-change the debate by signaling alignment when it doesn't exist." So true, so sad, and so frustrating that I still do this. I will keep working on it.

Once you've taken action, make sure you share the changes you've made. Ask if you overcorrected or undercorrected. Helpful hint: If the problem is something you've struggled with for some time, it's usually a good idea to try to overcorrect. If you get feedback that you move too fast, work on slowing down until someone tells you you're moving too slowly.

And if you weren't able to do anything differently, communicate why. When an employee told Kim she interrupted him and other employees in meetings, she wore a rubber band to her next staff meeting, told everyone about the feedback, and asked for help in changing this deeply ingrained bad habit that she couldn't realistically change overnight. She asked people to snap the rubber band on her wrist when they noticed her interrupting. (She knew that the people on her team would actually do that, and with a laugh — you might decide to take a different approach.) The rubber band helped her interrupt less. But more importantly, it made her listening tangible — and explained that although she couldn't change things overnight, she was working on it.

One of the biggest missteps we see leaders take is staying silent when, after careful consideration, they realize they're unable to act on feedback. When employees never hear back after giving feedback, they'll assume that their suggestions were ignored. It's much, much better to come back to your team and say something like, "Unfortunately, due to the executive team's priorities for the quarter, we won't be able to do ____, but I'm going to keep it in mind," than to say nothing at all.

6. Make giving feedback — not venting — a team habit.

Consistent venting, when you rehash the same problems without trying to understand or solve them, can make you and your team feel worse. This is because you're ingraining the frustration in your brain by talking about it over and over, without actually focusing on what can be learned or changed.

Even worse is when a person doesn't feel safe giving feedback to another person and instead vents their frustrations to a neutral third party. This may make the frustrated person feel better in the moment, but it doesn't solve anything long-term, since the other person is oblivious to their frustrating behaviors. When someone comes and talks to you about someone else who is not in the room, it may feel like you're being an empathetic listener. But really all you're doing is stirring the political pot. Instead, encourage them to go talk directly with the other person. Offer your services as a mediator, but remind them that it still requires both of them to talk to you at the same time. There are obvious exceptions — if a person is being bullied or harassed, don't tell them to go work it out directly.

Make feedback a team habit so that people feel safe giving it directly instead of venting to someone else. The place to start is soliciting feedback. If everyone is soliciting feedback, it's more likely to be met with open ears.

...

When things are up in the air, it can feel comforting to avoid difficult feedback. But creating stability for your team — and success for your organization — depends on your ability to learn what needs to change. Burying your head in the sand is never the safe thing to do. A culture of ruinous empathy or false harmony is not the path to success! Instead, invite criticism.