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## **ARTICLE** **RECEIVING FEEDBACK**

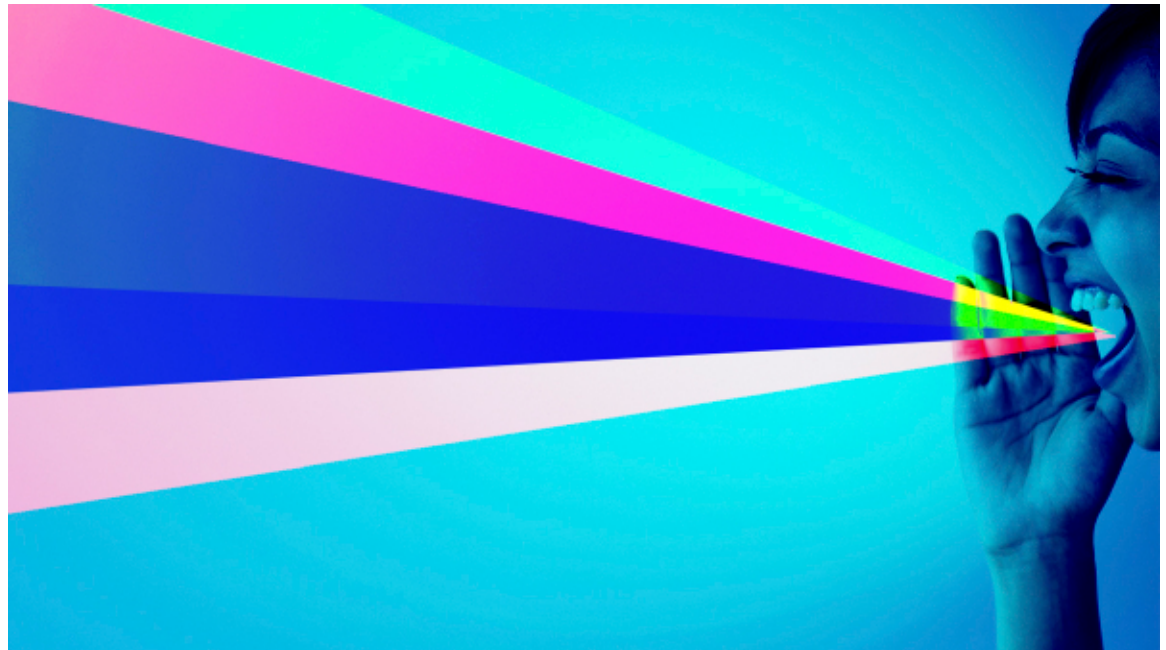
# How to Get the Feedback You Need

*by Carolyn O'Hara*

RECEIVING FEEDBACK

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You need feedback to learn and grow, and if you're waiting for your annual review to find out how you're performing, you're not getting enough of it. But how do you get the focused input you need? And if your boss is stingy with pointers and advice, how do you encourage her to give you more? Who else should you be asking to help you improve?

## What the Experts Say

Receiving feedback can be “a stressful experience,” says Ed Batista, an executive coach and an instructor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. That's why many people hesitate to ask for it. But the more often you do, [the less stressful it becomes](#) to initiate the conversation *and* to hear the

comments. “If you’re having a feedback conversation every week, there’s less to be surprised by and more opportunity to modify your behavior,” Batista explains. The process will also make you happier and more productive at work, adds Sheila Heen, author of *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*. “People who go out and solicit negative feedback — meaning they aren’t just fishing for compliments — report higher satisfaction,” she says. “They adapt more quickly to new roles, get higher performance reviews, and show others they are committed to doing their jobs.” Here’s how to ask for feedback that helps you get ahead.

### **Understand what you’re looking for**

Think about the kind of feedback you crave. Do you want more appreciation or acknowledgment? Evaluation of your performance on a particular project or task? Or [general coaching](#) about how you can improve and learn? Knowing this will help you craft your approach, says Heen. “You can go to your boss and say, *I feel like I get a ton of appreciation around here. I know I’m valued. What I don’t have a sense of is what I need to work on.*” And while advice on areas in which you can develop is often the most useful, “there is value in asking for positive feedback as well,” says Batista. Don’t hesitate to ask your boss to review your performance on an obviously successful project. “It’s can be an opportunity to build a stronger relationship,” he says.

### **Ask for feedback in real time**

If you want some insight into how you did on a particular task or how you might improve on the next project, don’t dawdle. It’s best to ask sooner rather than later. Batista advises that you not try to do it all in one conversation. “Chop it up into manageable chunks and space out the interactions,” he says. You also don’t have to schedule time in advance or make a formal approach. “Don’t think of it as sitting down to have an official conversation,” says Heen. “Just reach out to your boss, colleagues, or clients and have a very quick and informal coaching exchange.” You might pull your boss aside after a meeting, or close a conversation with a client with a parting request for her reaction to your role on a recent project.

### **Pose specific questions**

Whatever you do, don’t start off by asking, *Do you have any feedback for me?* “That’s a terrible question,” says Heen. “The answer is almost always no and you learn nothing.” She recommends instead asking, *What’s one thing I could improve?* so it’s clear that you’re asking for coaching and it’s clear that you assume there’s at least one thing you can work on. You can also tailor the question to the specific situation: *What’s one thing I could have done better in that meeting or presentation?* You should also avoid asking questions that are likely to result in yes or no answers. “Asking questions that begin with ‘how’ or ‘what’ will elicit fuller responses,” Batista says. He suggests questions like, *How did that go from your perspective?* or *What do you think I might have done differently?*

### **Press for examples**

To get the most out the feedback once you’ve asked, you may have to probe for specifics. “Sometimes, the person will say ‘I just think you need to be more assertive or more proactive or more of a team player,’” says Heen. “That’s vague and what we call a label. It’s not very helpful. You have

to unpack the label.” To do that, ask probing questions like, *Can you explain what you mean? How could I have been more assertive just now?* and *What kinds of things should I do to be more assertive going forward?*

### **Turn to colleagues**

Your boss certainly isn’t the only one qualified to give you feedback. “The people in the meeting with you or reading your spreadsheets are the ones who actually have the information to help you improve,” she says. So when looking for input, don’t just look up the organizational chart, but also left, right, and occasionally down. To kickstart a regular feedback loop with colleagues, offer input on, observations about, and praise for their work as well. “You’ll get more feedback when you’re giving some,” says Batista.

### **On virtual teams, ask more frequently**

It can be particularly hard for **virtual team members** to get regular feedback since physical distance often prevents informal exchanges. So “the onus is on you” to ask for more input, says Batista. Heen’s advice is to “pick up the phone.” Don’t rely on email because nuances tend to get lost.

### **Principles to Remember:**

#### **Do:**

- Understand the kind of feedback you want, whether it’s coaching, praise, or an evaluation of recent work.
- Ask in real time. This will create a more organic feedback loop going forward.
- Pose specific questions designed to elicit helpful information and examples.

#### **Don’t**

- Just ask your boss for feedback. Ask colleagues, junior staff, and clients as well.
- Think you have to schedule a formal meeting. You can have brief, informal coaching moments after meetings, in the elevator, and over coffee.
- Rely on email when you are on a virtual team. Pick up the phone.

### **Case study #1: Get the right feedback to grow**

Michelle Morgan, who works in online marketing in Missouri, couldn’t complain about the amount of feedback she was getting from her boss; he piled on the praise about her performance regularly. But she explains: “I wasn’t hearing anything that would help me grow. I very much wanted to become a bigger piece of what was going on and have more impact.”

She thought long and hard about the different kind of feedback she needed, and decided to approach her boss. She sat down with him and asked how she could exceed his expectations. “I told him I wanted to be taking steps up the ladder rather than remaining stagnant where I was.” She also

pressed him to create a specific set of goals for her: “If I were to wow you with my performance, what would that look like numerically?”

Her boss was impressed with her initiative, and began giving her more constructive feedback, detailing how she could expand her duties and stretch her skills. “If opportunities for growth came up, my boss would let me know in real time what step I could take,” she says. “The benefits of the feedback ended up far outweighing the initial awkwardness of asking for it in the first place.”

### **Case study #2: Keep your questions narrow**

Chelsey\*, a network engineer at a telecom company in Dallas, wasn’t getting much feedback from her superiors, and when she did, it was usually generic and vague. “I would seek feedback on my soft skills,” she says, “and they’d say ‘you’re very personable.’ That feels good, but I can’t exactly use it to improve myself.” So she decided to look elsewhere.

After her first turn leading a project, she approached the client for feedback, asking specific questions about what he thought went well and what could have been improved. After receiving positive reactions, she then went to her boss, kicking off the conversation by sharing the encouraging feedback she’d received from the client. And since she specifically wanted to hear constructive criticism of her leadership on the project, she focused her questions on that topic. “I said, ‘I would like to get your perspective and hear what I can do better next time.’”

Chelsey said this initial interaction helped create a “virtuous cycle” of future feedback. “Once someone knows that you like to receive feedback, it gets easier,” she says. She also makes it a practice to ask specific questions like: “How effective would you rate my leadership style?” or “How do you think I could have handled situation X better?” she says. “It usually results in more constructive feedback.”

*\*Not her real name*

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