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There's no shortage of advice about how to react to negative feedback. Whether the critic is a boss or a co-worker, the same familiar guidance is consistently presented: Listen carefully, don't get defensive, ask for time.

There's nothing wrong with these three suggestions, of course. But at the moment when an unhappy colleague is telling you loudly that the project plan you created left out some obvious key components, or your boss is taking you to task for the stumbles you made in running an important meeting, it's hard to recall these valid pointers, move them to the front of your mind, and actually act on them.
Here’s the point: unless you have spent a little time in advance thinking about what you’ll do the next time that—fairly or fouly—someone delivers some unexpected criticism, all the good advice you’ve heard about how to react won’t come immediately to mind. Unprepared, you’re likely to be so caught up in the immediacy of the moment that you won’t remember these three simple, familiar prescriptions that allow us to keep control and to master (or at least, defuse) the situation. So they bear repeating, and thinking through now—so you’ll be prepared in the heat of the moment.

1. **Listen carefully.** First, there’s no question that not interrupting and listening carefully is the right thing to do when you’re getting negative feedback. That’s familiar counsel. What’s often left undiscovered is the question of what, *exactly*, is it that you should be listening for?

There are several good reasons to remain silent when you’re on the receiving end of negative feedback. Of course, you want to understand exactly what the criticism is before you react to it. But you need to be listening for other things, too.

First, is what’s being said *fact or opinion?* That you didn’t include some components in your project plan is a fact. That you ran a meeting poorly is an opinion. Both may be accurate, but sorting out facts from opinion while you’re listening will make it easier for you to respond effectively.

Next, is it accurate? Distinguish the accuracy of the feedback from the quality of its presentation. Few people are skilled at presenting criticism in a way that makes the recipient feel comfortable accepting what’s being said as worthwhile information and learning from it. I often hear, “It wasn’t what she said, it was the way she said it.” OK, the way she said it was harsh and callous and insensitive. But is she right? Even though negative feedback may be badly delivered, it may be accurate.

What’s the intent? What’s the motive? If the person who’s giving you feedback is someone who’s usually trustworthy and reliable, this is feedback you’ll want to pay close attention to. If the individual is egotistical, or is into one-upmanship, or has a tendency to dramatize, you should still be professional and listen to what’s being said. But consider the source, and take it with a grain of salt.

2. **Don’t get defensive.** When the other person’s criticisms seem inaccurate, ill-informed, petty, irrational, or just plain weird, it’s easy to become defensive. Even when your criticizer is factually wrong, the response “You’re wrong!” won’t ever be helpful. Not even if you can prove it.

It’s in our nature to listen defensively. As the other individual is giving us a dose of negative feedback, we tend to listen not to understand what’s being said, but to spot distortions or inaccuracies or faulty conclusions. We listen so that we can refute errors or justify our actions or prove the other individual wrong.

But even if the negative feedback we’re getting is demonstrably wrong, it’s not in our best interest to immediately try to prove it. Try to prove someone wrong and we become argumentative. We’re close-minded to the useful information that may be hidden in the poorly presented feedback.
The key is to listen to the other person *without planning our reply*. Simply nodding until the other person has completely finished will make sure that your counterpart has said everything intended.

Asking questions helps eliminate the appearance of defensiveness and keeps us from immediately jumping in to justify our actions. Ask, “I want to be sure I understand what you’re saying. Do I have it right that you feel . . .” That question can help the other individual communicate clearly whatever his or her core message may be. Asking for examples may help you gain useful insights that are buried in the unconstructive message.

**3. Ask for time.** Unless the negative feedback concerns something that is right-on-the-spot fixable, it’s good to ask for time to consider what your informant has told you. This provides several benefits. It defuses the immediate situation. It tells the other person that you consider their feedback important enough that you want to consider it carefully and calmly. And it allows you to think through the accuracy of what you’ve been told, perhaps testing its validity with others.

Saying something like, “I appreciate your feedback. I’d like to give what you’ve said some real thought and get back to you,” and then adding, “Is there anything else I should know?” will demonstrate that you take what you’ve been told seriously and will ensure that there’s been nothing left unsaid.

Asking for time also helps defuse the emotional load. Say, “This is important. I want to talk with you about what you’ve told me, but right now I’m overloaded/distracted/feeling defensive. Can we get back together tomorrow morning?”

In that following conversation, whatever explanations or defenses you offer will be more carefully considered than if they were blurted out right after the negative message was received. Once the other party feels heard and understood, it’s much more likely that the criticism will be put in perspective by both giver and receiver. Once you fully understand the negative feedback that’s been delivered, it may be appropriate to offer an apology.

But then, close it off. Don’t over-apologize. Apologize once if necessary, sincerely and maturely. Remember that criticism and negative feedback are a fact of life. Learn from your mistakes, and move on.