



Welcome  
to the Jungle



# work

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*Giving and receiving feedback is, without exaggeration, one of the most important professional skills of 2022. Between WFH and the Great Resignation, frequent check-ins are the workplace glue holding projects together at a time when many workers feel burnt out, lost or unsatisfied. Whether the remarks come from your boss, colleagues, clients or business partners, they're one of the best ways to touch*

*base with your ecosystem. Yet the feedback process is a delicate art, so here are some pointers on how to get it, give it and use it to your advantage.*

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while senior staff and management have to know where everyone stands to ensure the company's smooth running.

*"Without feedback you may not become aware of areas for improvement, so all feedback is a gift even if it doesn't always feel good to receive it," says Terry B McDougall, a certified professional coach who specializes in management skills, teamwork and career development.*

That said, not all performance critiques are equal—or solicited. When is a comment valid and when is your co-worker just being a jerk? How can you get clear advice without bothering your boss? The whole feedback process is a special kind of opinion-based activity that can quickly devolve into murky, awkward social situations. The best way to navigate this sea of gray is to break it down, so let's zoom in.

## **Recognize the difference between feedback, advice and criticism**

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Sabine Smith, a New York-based career coach and board member at Coaching For Everyone, considers two things when she defines these different-but-related terms: the intent of the giver and the impact on the receiver.

- **Feedback: a collaborative exercise.** *"Feedback, when done right, is motivated by a desire to build up the receiver. Even though it looks at past behavior, it is future oriented,"* says Smith. The intent is to grow

someone's potential by cultivating a strength, bridging a gap or promoting their learning process. Samorn Selim, founder of the

coaching company Career Unicorns, describes “feedback” as a cooperative process where the speaker states the facts about a specific situation and what they observed, then invites the receiver to reflect as well. “*The person receiving feedback should be given a chance to share her thoughts and what she thinks she can do to improve,*” says Selim.

- **Advice: giving direct recommendations.** “*Advice is also focused on how you can improve. But instead of it being a collaborative process, the person giving advice tells you what to do,*” says Selim. This doesn’t mean advice is always condescending or autocratic—it’s actually a great tool for employees who want to get ahead or tap into the knowledge of their more experienced co-workers. “*When feedback is too vague, the person requesting it may want to pivot to asking for advice,*” says Smith, who recalls a 2019 *Harvard Business Review* study that found employees who asked for advice ended up with more actionable insights. “*If I put my coach hat on, there’s a danger to advice because the receiver is totally reliant on the giver for direction,*” says Smith. “*That said, there are many times when it makes sense to glean from the expertise of others.*”
- **Criticism: pointing out errors.** “*Criticism is when someone provides feedback on what you did wrong (in their opinion),*” says McDougall. She believes that while some criticism can be useful, it’s often too vague to help. For example, telling someone “*The cake you baked tastes terrible*” critiques their work without providing any tips on how to improve, while “*The cake you baked tastes terrible because you used too much baking soda*” explains precisely what went wrong. When doled out thoughtlessly—unfairly poking at someone’s weaknesses without considering their potential to evolve—criticism can foster a toxic work culture that favors petty blaming over healthy collaboration.

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## How to stay cool when receiving spontaneous feedback

*“Feedback, advice and criticism can be hard to receive when it’s unsolicited. Know that it’s human to feel defensive,”* says Selim. It’s also human to be clumsy, unclear or untimely when communicating, which often causes the receiver to react negatively to the way in which the feedback was expressed, and so miss the message. Here are five steps to help you remain composed and dignified when someone surprises you with their opinion:

- **Do your best to stay grounded.** Take a deep breath: you always have a choice and can do whatever you like with the information you are given—including nothing.
- **Take time to process how you feel.** Acknowledge if you are angry, upset or defensive, and remember these are totally normal reactions. Then do your best not to let those emotions lead your response.
- **Check where the feedback is coming from and what’s *actually* being said,** as opposed to how you’re interpreting it. Your boss, for example, is in a position to give you feedback whether you want it or not, and you shouldn’t be afraid to ask for clarification. If it’s coming from elsewhere, think about whether you trust the intentions of the giver, or if the information will be useful to you in future scenarios. Sometimes it’s good to get a second opinion from a trusted mentor, advisor or an objective friend.
- **Stay curious.** Ask yourself if any of this information might be true, what might serve you, and if it provides opportunities for learning and growth. Perhaps you were unknowingly making mistakes or heading towards a negative outcome and the feedback-giver is trying to lend a helping hand. Listen to your intuition.
- **Ask yourself how you want to proceed.** Don’t forget that it’s always within your power to set healthy boundaries by choosing how you

prefer to receive feedback and the way you’d like it to be communicated.

Decided it's "*Blah blah blah*" from the peanut gallery? McDougall suggests responding with, "*Thank you, I'll take your feedback under advisement,*" "*Thank you, I've got it under control,*" or simply staying silent.

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## Asking for feedback? Check yourself first

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Requesting feedback can be way more complicated than it seems. While you shouldn't have to wing it solo, you also need to be respectful of others' time. Before approaching anyone for their thoughts on your performance, make sure it's the appropriate moment:

- **Be honest with yourself about why you want feedback.** Do you really seek to progress at work or does your internal critic need the validation of others? "*If it's the latter, then you may find yourself getting defensive if what you hear doesn't align with your expectations,*" says Smith. Make sure you're not coming from a place of insecurity, but an open mindset that's excited to learn and grow. If you're looking to improve because your manager has indicated that it's necessary, asking for feedback is the first step to understanding their perspective. Then it's up to you to choose your response and what you'll take on board.
- **Figure out what you can teach yourself and what requires guidance,** then parcel your questions to make sure you're not pestering your boss

or co-workers with unnecessary interruptions. Scheduling a meeting is a noteworthy option, as constructive feedback often takes time to

unpack.

If you're in the middle of an urgent situation, first focus on fixing the issue at hand. Wait until the dust has settled before asking what you could have done differently. "The timing should be close enough to the event that people remember the details of what happened, but removed enough that the issue is being addressed and emotions have calmed," says McDougall.

- **If your work situation is toxic, focus on finding new opportunities instead.** *"If you know that your manager, co-workers or others involved are toxic—meaning they only criticize, yell or throw a tantrum—then those are situations where it's best to minimize contact,"* says Selim. *"The feedback you're being given may not be truthful, may be psychologically and emotionally damaging, and will not be constructive."*

Ready to request an assessment of your work? Read our guide to how to ask for feedback, even if you're doing it remotely.

## Navigating different sources of feedback

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- **From management:** they're in charge of a) making sure you're well equipped and informed, and b) your raises and promotions. The key is to show you're competent, motivated and capable. Selim suggests the following framework: sharing what you've done, identifying the issues you're running into and offering your ideas for solutions.
- **From a co-worker:** colleagues may be a little more reticent to share their feelings as they may be afraid of your reaction. Make sure it's clear that you're open to all feedback, and follow through by staying calm and appreciative while they express their thoughts. Selim believes that before you approach your peers, it's important to assess if the person has your back or the bandwidth to support you. If the answers are yes, you can proceed with the same framework as for a manager.
- **From a client or business partner:** in these relationships, *"you're hired to solve their problems. So when you do approach them for feedback,*

*it's important that you're framing it so they know you want to ensure you're improving the quality of service to them,"* says Selim.

Whoever you're seeking counsel from, says Smith, remember to “*thank the person for taking time to offer their perspective—and do bear in mind that ultimately it is a perspective.*”

*Photo: Welcome to the Jungle*

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