Feedback Loops: Going Negative

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Going Negative

By Patrick Barry

Negative feedback is medicine served best to the right people at the right time.

Yelet Fishbach is a professor at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business who has studied how people seek out and process negative feedback. One of the ways she has done this is through a classroom exercise in which she divides the students into two groups: feedback givers and feedback receivers. The givers are told to pair up with a receiver and communicate the following feedback in a one-on-one setting:

- the person’s performance is unsatisfactory;
- improvement is needed; and
- there are concrete ways they can get on the right track.

Yet when the receivers are surveyed after the exercise, many of them seem to think that the feedback they got was overwhelmingly positive. The conversation was supposed to be about their deficiencies and the importance of making specific changes in the future. But it was instead interpreted as a ringing endorsement of their current output. A lot of them leave the feedback session sincerely believing that they’ve just been told the equivalent of “Keep up the great work!”

One explanation for this disconnect is that the feedback receivers self-protectively filtered out the negative feedback offered by the feedback givers. A frequently cited survey of Stanford MBA students, for example, found that 87 percent rated their own academic performance to be in the top half of the class. Similarly, a survey of university faculty found that 94 percent considered themselves to be better-than-average teachers. Those numbers don’t add up. You can’t have 94 percent of teachers be above average. Same with having 87 percent of students in the top half of the class. Grade inflation is one thing. Mathematical impossibility is something else entirely.

The Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert captures this capacity for self-aggrandizement nicely in his bestselling book “Stumbling on Happiness.” “How do we manage to think of ourselves as great drivers, talented lovers, and brilliant chefs when the facts of our lives include a pathetic parade of dented cars, disappointed partners, and deflated soufflés?” he asks. “The answer is simple: We cook the facts.”
It's possible internal fact-cooking played a role in the results of Fishbach's in-class experiment. But Fishbach herself suspects a different culprit. She thinks the real problem is with how the negative feedback was provided—not the way it was (mis)processed. Her research suggests that people often bury the negative feedback they are supposed to deliver and often avoid addressing the specific behavior that needs to change. Instead, they, much less productively, discuss hypothetical behavior. In other words, they say something like, “If one of our lawyers submits a poorly written brief, our entire firm looks bad.” But what they really mean is “Alex, the last two briefs you filed contained a lot of typos and run-on sentences. We need to really work on your editing skills.”

The first version is a lot less confrontational. But it is also a lot less helpful, particularly in the long run. That's because, as the social psychologist Heidi Grant points out, “without awareness of the mistakes [they] are making, no one can possibly improve.”

**Novice vs. expert**

Grant's observation appears in an article she wrote for the Harvard Business Review called “Sometimes Negative Feedback Is Best.” In it, she discusses additional research by Fishbach, this time published with another psychologist, Stacey Finkelstein. Here's how Grant summarizes their findings, which focus on the different functions that positive feedback and negative feedback serve:

- Positive feedback is good for “increasing a person's commitment to a certain project, idea, skill, activity, or even career choice. It encourages them to keep working and reassures them that they are making good choices and are on the right path.”
- Negative feedback, on the other hand, “is helpful because it is informative—it tells you where you need to spend your effort and offers insight into how you might improve.”

Finding the right balance between these options can be tricky and will likely require knowing a little bit about whether the person receiving the feedback is more of a novice or more of an expert. In one study by Fishbach and Finkelstein, for example, students taking a beginner-level French class said they would prefer having a teacher who focused on their strengths. They essentially wanted a super-encouraging cheerleader.

But students taking an advanced version of the class made pretty much the opposite choice. They wanted a teacher who was more critical and would point out their mistakes.

The difference suggests that when you are a novice, positive feedback can be motivating. It validates your decision to pursue something new—whether that be a language, a sport, a recipe, or possibly an entirely different practice area. It also reminds you that progress is possible. Persisting is a lot easier when you don't have to constantly overcome feelings of futility.

When you are an expert, however, you don't necessarily need that same degree of reassurance. The top trial lawyers in the country already know they belong in the courtroom. So praise-filled support and encouragement might not benefit them as much as it would a newbie nervously preparing to conduct their first cross-examination. What experts put more value on, according to Fishbach and Finkelstein, are perceptive critiques that help them continue to elevate their game. Complacency, not confidence, is their bigger concern.

**Negative demand**
A final aspect of Fishbach and Finklestein’s research is worth mentioning. Although experts definitely seem to be more interested than novices in getting negative feedback, pretty much everyone who participated in their studies wanted at least some negative feedback. “People are generally open to negative feedback,” they conclude, noting that the demand will likely be particularly high when the goal is “to acquire new habits or improve existing ones.” (See Finkelstein, Stacey R., and Ayelet Fishbach. *Tell Me What I Did Wrong: Experts Seek and Respond to Negative Feedback*. Journal of Consumer Research 39.1 (2012): 22–38.)

That’s not to say that you should start indiscriminately spraying people with negative feedback. Trust and rapport remain key building blocks for any feedback situation, and they are especially important when candid criticism is involved. “Tough love” can quickly degenerate into an excuse simply to be mean.

Yet Fishbach and Finklestein make a compelling case for the role negative feedback can play. As the business journalist Alina Tugend noted when discussing their research in a column for The New York Times, what people often forget is that the goal of feedback isn’t to help people feel better. The goal of feedback is to help them do better. (See Alina Tugend, *You’ve Been Doing a Fantastic Job. Just One Thing…*, The New York Times, Apr. 4, 2013.)

Once we understand that distinction, we might also see that “going negative” can be—in the right circumstances and with the right people—a net positive.

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