

MANAGING PEOPLE

Your Employees Want the Negative Feedback You Hate to Give

by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman

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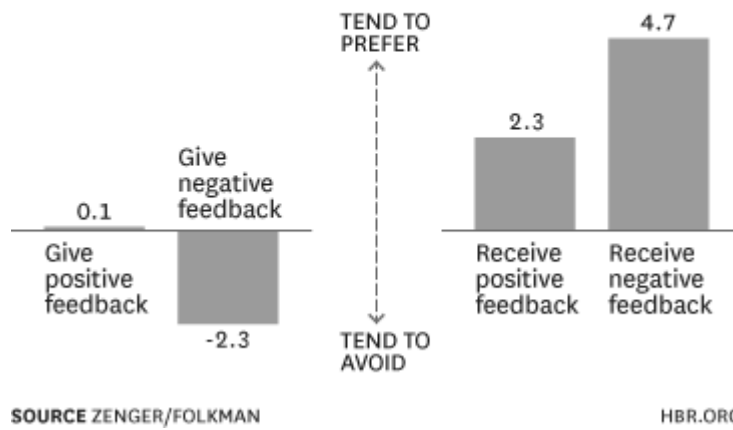
Would you rather hear positive feedback about your performance or suggestions for improvement?

For the last two weeks, we've been compiling data on this question, and on people's general attitudes toward feedback, both positive and corrective. So far we've collected it from 899 individuals, 49% from the U.S. and the remainder from abroad. Before we tell you what we found, we suggest you take the same assessment here so you can put our findings within your own personal context.

What our assessment measures is the extent to which you prefer to give and to receive both positive and corrective feedback. It also measures your level of self-confidence. For the purposes of this study, we grouped praise, reinforcement, and congratulatory comments together as *positive feedback*. And we've chosen to call suggestions for improvement, explorations of new and better ways to do things, or pointing out something that was done in a less than optimal way *corrective feedback*. We think this is an important distinction, because as the following data affirm, people want corrective feedback, as we've defined it, even more than praise, if it's provided in a constructive manner. By roughly a three to one margin, they believe it does even more to improve their performance than positive feedback.

The graph below shows, on average, the degree to which the participants in our initial sample tend to avoid or prefer giving and receiving positive and corrective feedback.

**NO ONE LIKES TO GIVE NEGATIVE FEEDBACK,
BUT EVERYONE WANTS TO HEAR IT**



The first column indicates that roughly the same number of people prefer to give positive feedback as those who do not. This is fascinating, given the high percentage of people who appreciate receiving positive feedback, along with its positive impact on performance improvement.

The second column shows how much people prefer to avoid giving negative feedback (a finding that came as no surprise to us, certainly). The third column shows that people prefer receiving positive comments to the same degree that they dislike giving negative feedback. Again hardly a surprise.

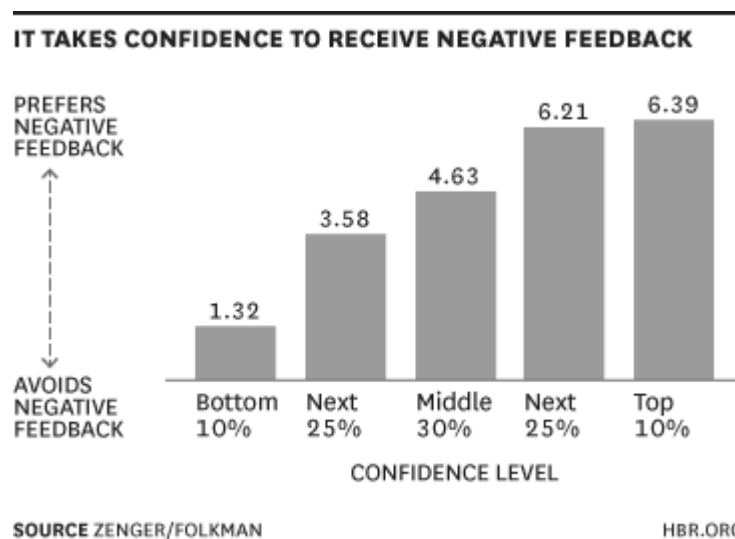
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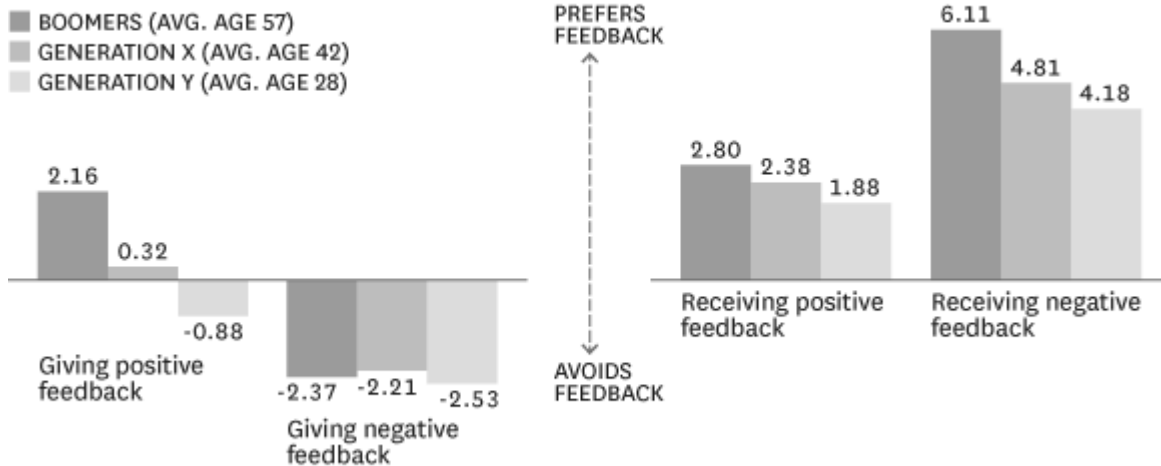
We also asked respondents an additional question: Would they prefer praise/recognition or corrective feedback? And this time their replies did surprise us. A significantly larger number (57%) preferred corrective feedback; only 43% preferred praise/recognition. Well, perhaps that's not surprising, since our most emphatic finding related to which kind of feedback had the most impact on people's job performance. When asked what was most helpful in their career, fully 72% said they thought their performance would improve if their managers would provide corrective feedback.

But how it was done really mattered – 92% of the respondents agreed with the assertion, “Negative (redirecting) feedback, *if delivered appropriately*, is effective at improving performance.” In this regard we find it telling that the people who find it difficult and stressful to deliver negative feedback also were significantly less willing to receive it themselves. On the other hand, those who rated their managers as highly effective at providing them with honest, straightforward feedback tended to score significantly higher on their preference for receiving corrective feedback. And, as the graph below shows, there also appears to be a strong positive correlation between a person’s level confidence and his or her preference for receiving negative feedback.



We were curious to see if people of different generations felt differently about feedback. In our sample 12% were Baby Boomers, 50% were members of Generation X, and 38% were in Generation Y. As our final graph shows, everyone displayed an aversion to giving negative feedback (though interestingly, the Gen Xers slightly less so). And every group was both open to positive feedback and even more open to corrective feedback.

THE OLDER YOU ARE, THE MORE FEEDBACK YOU WANT

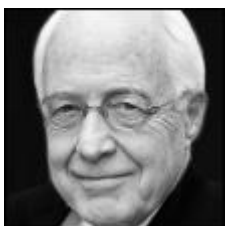


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But generally speaking, the older they were, the more feedback people wanted of both kinds. The Boomers, in fact, showed a much stronger preference for giving positive feedback and for receiving negative feedback than the other two groups (while the young Gen Yers don't seem to feel comfortable giving even positive feedback yet.) Some people have hypothesized that the members of Gen Y are hungry for and open to feedback, and especially to positive feedback, but here it turns out their preference is not as strong as the Boomer and Gen X groups. It's not clear whether these differences are primarily age related or a function of having been in the workforce for a shorter period of time.

What is clear is the paradox our data reveal, no matter how we slice them. People believe constructive criticism is essential to their career development. They want it from their leaders. But their leaders often don't feel comfortable offering it up. From this we conclude that the ability to give corrective feedback constructively is one of the critical keys to leadership, an essential skill to boost your team's performance that could set you apart.



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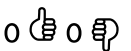
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tamarahblack 5 years ago

Very interesting article. I've found within my team the Gen Y age employees deeply want and seek out constant feedback on performance and exhibit high levels of job dissatisfaction without it. The more directly and frequently it is provided the more satisfied they seem to be.

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