# 6 Steps Leaders Can Take to Get the Most Out of Feedback

by Jennifer Porter

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Business publications are filled with articles about feedback: how important it is for leaders, how leaders can both give and receive it, what happens when leaders don't get it, and even what to do if someone is not open to feedback they have been given. The focus tends to be on the transfer of data.

What is less explored is how leaders should respond once they receive that data. Through our work coaching thousands of leaders across industries, my colleagues and I have found that, even when leaders make an effort to collect robust feedback, they only access about 25% of its potential value. This is because the process often stops too soon.

**Here's a break down of how it typically unfolds:**

1. Feedback providers are chosen by the leader, their manager, or HR.
2. They are asked to share their perspectives on that leader's strengths and weaknesses through a survey or in a conversation with the leader's manager, HR partner, or executive coach.

3. The feedback data is synthesized, and put into a report.
4. The report is given to the leader.
5. The leader reads the report and accepts some of the information as useful, questions some of the perspectives, and rejects some data as unfair or invalid.

At this point, the process is considered complete.

But if the leader stops here, they miss many valuable opportunities: to fully explore the data and reflect on what they are hearing (and rejecting), to address questions the data raises, to model the best way to react to feedback, to engage differently with and strengthen their relationships with feedback providers, and to create meaningful change that will improve their effectiveness.

To achieve all these benefits and get the other 75% of value from their feedback, we ask all the leaders we coach to take a few additional steps. The next time you receive feedback, you can do the same.

**1. Reflect upon and talk through the data with a trusted partner**. Learning happens through reflection. Take time and space to think about these questions:

- What exactly did the feedback report tell you?
- What reactions and judgments do you have around the data?
- How open are you to accepting the data as evidence of others' experiences with you?
- What assumptions are you making that drive your behaviors? Are they accurate?
- What impact are you having on others?
- How does that compare to the impact you want to have?

As you think about talking through the feedback, it's normal to feel uncomfortable. Find someone (an executive coach, peer, or even someone outside of your organization) who is trustworthy, curious, a good listener, and is not in a role to evaluate your performance. You want to feel psychologically safe enough to be open and thoughtful in this discussion. And, while you may want to ask for advice at this point, getting it is actually more harmful than helpful. It will deprive you of the opportunity to think through what you have heard, make sense of it, and own it as yours.

For example, one leader I recently worked with received feedback that he often appears distracted when other people speak and does not ask his team questions in order to learn more about their perspectives. As a result, his team thinks he's uncollaborative and doesn't enjoy working with him. We talked through the feedback, exploring his defensiveness around it, what he is doing to create this impact, and what is driving his behavior. Through our conversations, he was able to reflect. He discovered that he assumes he knows more than others when it comes to certain technical matters, and therefore, sees no merit in asking their opinions. Once he understood his motivations, he was able to explore ways to approach the situation differently.

Whoever you choose to confide in, remember that their job is to listen carefully and help you sort through your thoughts so that you can come to your own conclusions.

**2. Draft a development plan**. After you fully understand the feedback and have identified what you want to do more and less of, draft a development plan. Your plan should:

- Summarize the most important feedback you heard — positive and negative
- Include any questions you have about the data (without defensiveness or justifications)

- Articulate the steps you will take to better leverage or increase your strengths and mitigate or correct your weaknesses
- Identify the help you need to take those steps and improve

The first draft of your development plan will force you to synthesize and prioritize what data is most important to focus on, convert it into learning, and determine the actions you need to take. Listing concrete steps increases the likelihood that you will actually change your behavior and improve.

**3. Discuss the feedback and your development plan with the feedback providers**. This is typically the most difficult and vulnerable step in the process — and also the most powerful. Receiving feedback is challenging (particularly since we often skip over the positive feedback and only pay attention to the negative). It can elicit feelings of surprise, confusion, awkwardness, embarrassment, and even anger or shame. Given this, it's understandable that many leaders do not want to talk about their feedback directly with their providers. But in doing so, you will be modeling transparency, humility, and openness, get answers to any lingering questions, and hopefully receive concrete examples of the behaviors you need to change. Most importantly, you will strengthen your relationships with your colleagues and increase the likelihood of them being invested in your improvement.

In these one-on-one meetings:

- Thank your feedback providers (an important and often forgotten step)
- Summarize what you heard in the feedback. (This is also part one of your development plan, and can be sent in advance.) Remember, you won't know who said what, so during this step, share what you heard overall, and don't try to figure out individual sources.
- Ask any clarifying questions (never debate or defend)
- Request additional input and specific examples
- Share the steps you plan to take to improve
- Ask for any help that you need

Many of the leaders we coach ask if they can do this step in a group meeting. It's a bad idea. It may be a more efficient option, but it's also far less effective. In a group setting, it's unlikely that you or colleagues will be as open, thoughtful, and candid as you would be during a private discussion. A group meeting can also send a message to feedback providers that efficiency is more important to you than the deeper learning and relationship building that can come from meeting one-on-one.

**4. Revise your development plan**. Hopefully your meetings yield some deeper insights and specific examples of the behaviors you need to work on. With this new data in hand, revise your development plan, and include how and when you will assess and measure your progress. Most of the leaders we work with re-collect data 3-6 months after their first round of feedback, either by talking with colleagues directly or asking their manager, HR partner, or executive coach to do so. Decide your approach and add it to your plan.

Send your revised plan to your feedback providers so they know what to expect, and can see that their conversations with you had an impact. Sharing your plan will also increase the likelihood that you do what you say you'll do.

**5. Take action**. This is where the real work begins. Learning from the feedback and follow-up meetings creates self-awareness, which is great, but unless you actually take the steps outlined in your development plan, you will not see improvement.

For example, if you want to be better at developing your people, you might plan to hold one-on-one meetings more regularly to better understand their growth priorities and agree on what you can do to support them. Or, if you want to be more inclusive during meetings, you could plan to listen to others' comments before giving your opinion, or look for opportunities to not speak at all, so

others can.

Whatever change you want to make, following the steps in your plan is key to improving.

**6. Evaluate progress and repeat the process**. Follow the guidance in your revised development plan around when and how you'll assess progress. What behaviors are your colleagues seeing you practice, compared to when they first shared their feedback? What has improved? What hasn't?  What is the impact of those behaviors now? What else is needed?

With this data collected, you can again reflect and explore it with a trusted partner, revise your development plan, and take further action.

If all of this seems like a lot of work, that's because it is. It takes time, energy, vulnerability, and courage to ask for feedback and then go through the steps that are necessary to effectively process, learn from, and act upon it.

Despite this, we repeatedly hear from leaders who invest in this process that it's more valuable than getting their feedback report. These leaders gain deeper insights on their strengths and gaps, build stronger relationships with feedback providers, and consequently, have a greater impact on their colleagues and organization.

Great leaders don't just get feedback, they work to understand it, and commit to and follow through on actions to create meaningful and lasting change.

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Dr. Linda F. Williams, DSW    a month ago

Bingo! Utilize the feedback and avoid, at all cost, confirmation bias. I would suggest adding in the feedback providers in the first phase of the development planning. This will further combat confirmation bias and group think.

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