

3 tips to recover quickly when you feel defensive about feedback

Feedback — even when it’s difficult to hear — is valuable. Don’t let your initial reaction keep you from learning something important. Video transcript:

Loren Mooney: You’ve probably had the feeling before when receiving tough feedback. You feel surprised, tense, maybe even like you’re being attacked. Your first response is to go on defense:

“That was someone else’s fault.” “I had other things going on.”

Or even, *“You’re wrong!”*

This feeling is completely normal. But it also prevents you from really listening to what the other person has to say. And if your first response is to deflect or lash out, you could also build a reputation for being defensive.

So, how can you get better at regaining composure when someone hits you with tough feedback?

Here are a few tactics you can practice.

First, tell yourself that feedback is a statement about the person giving it, not you.

What they’re saying may feel like an attack, especially if they’re nervous or didn’t prepare well. But they probably didn’t intend it that way.

More likely, they’re giving you feedback on something because they really care about it — that’s interesting!

So, if you notice yourself thinking, *“Oh no! They think I’m awful,”* try to shift that inner voice toward curiosity: *“What does this say about what they care about?”*

Then, make the first things that come out of your mouth a brief thank you — and a question for clarification.

Like: *“Thanks for sharing that. Could you explain what you mean by ‘sloppy’?”*

Or

, *“Thanks. It sounds like you’re saying that the recommendations in my report are hard to understand — do I have that right?”*

When you thank the person, you show receptiveness. And asking questions does a couple of important things: It buys you time, so that your brain can regain some control of your emotions and process the message; and it helps the other person go beyond generalities to give you the specific information you need in order to use the feedback.

Finally, if you’re feeling really overwhelmed, ask for a break.

It’s perfectly fine to say something like,

“Thank you for sharing this. It’s an important issue, and I’d like to take some time to think about it. Could we pause for now?”

And suggest a time to reconvene after you’ve had some time to process the feedback and think of a productive response.

Feedback — even when it’s hard to hear or not well-delivered — can be a fantastic opportunity to grow. And with a little practice, you can begin to shift your internal reaction from, *“Oh no, I’m under attack!”* to *“Wait, I could learn something here.”*