Feedback that stings

Taking criticism without getting defensive or falling apart.

UNDERSTAND

Why it stings so much

Humans are a social species: our brain processes disapproval and criticism a bit like physical threats. When a negative comment lands, the internal alarm goes off and two reflexes kick in: **defending yourself** (“yes, but...”) or **shutting down** (accepting everything, then ruminating). Either way, you're no longer really listening.

> **Remember: the sting is biology, not truth.** What you feel in the first three seconds is not reliable information about how serious the criticism is. It's just the alarm. It goes off... then it calms down.

IN THIS SHEET

This sheet gives you

- The **Hear / Clarify / Choose** grid: 3 questions before you react
- The three-step response for the first 10 seconds
- A bank of phrases to **ask** your manager for feedback
- Signs that help you recognize when it's no longer feedback

MYTH OR REALITY?

“If it hurts, it means I'm too sensitive.”

MYTH. The stress reaction to criticism is universal. Sensitivity isn't the problem; reacting in the heat of the moment is.

“A good employee doesn't get criticized.”

MYTH. Someone who is learning will inevitably produce imperfect work. That's how a normal first year on the job works.

“Feedback is all or nothing: you take it all or not at all.”

MYTH. Feedback is information, not a verdict. You can keep part of it and leave the rest, as long as you've truly heard it first.

The basic sort: your work or you?

Legitimate feedback describes an **observable behaviour or result** (“your report came in two days late”). A judgment targets **who you are** (“you're lazy”). The first can be changed, is tied to a point in time, and is usable. The second is not feedback. If it keeps happening, see the signs on page 4.

THE CORE TOOL

The Hear / Clarify / Choose grid

Three questions to ask yourself before you really react. Take a recent criticism you received, at work, at school or during an internship, and run it through the grid.

1

Hear

"What was actually said?"

The real words, not your interpretation. The sentence you heard ("I'm incompetent") was often never said at all.

2

Clarify

"Do I have a concrete example?"

Without an example, feedback is a cloud. Ask: "Can you show me a specific spot? What would a successful version look like?"

3

Choose

"What do I decide to do with it?"

Founded: I change how I do things. **Partly founded:** I keep a piece of it. **Unfounded (once I've cooled down):** I let it go. All three answers are legitimate.

YOUR TURN

Practice case

Think back to a criticism that stung recently.

1. Hear. The exact words that were said (not what you felt):

2. Clarify. The concrete example you have, or the question you would ask to get one:

3. Choose. Your decision: what do you keep, what do you leave, and what will your first step be?

Quick check: if in step 1 you wrote a judgment about yourself ("he thinks I'm useless"), go back to the real words. If the real words did target you as a person, this isn't the grid you need: see page 4.

IN THE MOMENT

The first 10 seconds

The worst time to improvise is when the alarm goes off. Prepare your response ahead of time: it commits you to nothing, except listening.

1. Breathe

One real breath through your nose while the other person finishes their sentence. A signal to your body: there's no tiger in the room.

2. Rephrase

“OK. If I understand correctly, the problem is the deadline, not the content?” You show that you heard, without admitting or disputing anything.

3. Thank

“Thanks for telling me, I'd rather know now.” Not overdoing it: it simply closes the door on defensive mode.

Criticism in front of others, or in a curt tone? You're allowed to buy some time: “I'm happy to talk about it. Could we take ten minutes later?” Postponing isn't running away: it's choosing a moment when you'll truly be able to listen.

EXPERT LEVEL

Phrase bank: asking for feedback

Don't wait for feedback: go get it. When you're the one asking, you choose the moment and the topic, and there's no surprise.

AFTER A TASK OR PROJECT

- “What could I do differently next time?”
- “If there were one thing to improve first, what would it be?”

ONGOING (SUMMER OR PART-TIME JOB)

- “Does the way I do X work for you, or would you do it differently?”
- “If there's anything I should adjust, I'd rather know right away.”

IN A MEETING WITH YOUR MANAGER

- “I'd like your input on [specific task]: what went well, and what went less well?”
- “What would make the difference between good work and excellent work in my role?”

AFTER RECEIVING FEEDBACK

- “I reworked [item] based on your comment. Is it closer to what you had in mind?”
- “Can you show me an example of what you consider successful?”

Pro tip: ask a specific question rather than “do you have any feedback for me?”. A vague question gets a vague answer (“no, no, it's all good!”). A specific question gets you information months before your official review.

THE SIGNS

When it's no longer feedback

A good manager criticizes the work, never the person. A few signs to help you recognize the line:

FEEDBACK, EVEN IF CLUMSY

- ○ Targets a specific task, result or behaviour
- ○ Tied to a point in time (“Tuesday”, “this report”)
- ○ You can do something concrete with it
- ○ One-off, linked to a real situation

WARNING SIGNS

- ○ Targets who you are: intelligence, character, worth
- ○ Keeps happening, with no link to a specific task
- ○ Humiliation in front of others, mockery
- ○ Leaves you diminished rather than equipped

In Quebec, psychological harassment at work is covered by the **Act respecting labour standards**: your employer has an obligation to prevent it and to make it stop. If the warning signs keep happening, talk to someone you trust and check with the resources below. A full JobStory episode will be dedicated to this topic.

RESOURCE BOX

CNESST
cnesst.gouv.qc.ca · 1 844 838-0808
Labour standards and psychological harassment

Tel-jeunes
teljeunes.com · text 514 600-1002
For ages 20 and under

Éducaloi
educaloi.qc.ca
Your rights at work, explained simply

Info-Social
811, option 2
Psychosocial support, 24/7

Carrefour jeunesse-emploi (CJE)
rcjeq.org
Free support near you

JobStory podcast
Episode “Saying no at work”
Setting limits without closing doors

CHALLENGE OF THE WEEK

Pick your level and check things off as you go.

Level 1 · Receive without reacting

- ☐ I spotted a moment when I received a comment (work, school, elsewhere)
- ☐ I tried the three steps: breathe, rephrase, thank
- ☐ I wrote down what happened: in the conversation, and inside me

Level 2 · Go get it

- ☐ I chose a recent task and a person I trust
- ☐ I asked a question from the phrase bank (page 3)
- ☐ I ran the answer through the grid: hear, clarify, choose