

# How Do You Make Feedback Less Painful - and Still Useful? Transcript

**Rachel Salaman 00:06**

Hello, and welcome to the Mind Tools Expert Voices Podcast. This episode is all about feedback: why it often feels so difficult – to give, and to receive – and how we might be able to make it a little bit easier! I'm Rachel Salaman host of all the Expert Interviews in the Mind Tools archive.

**Jonathan Hancock 00:28**

And I'm Jonathan Hancock, an editor and writer at Mind Tools – where we specialize in addressing common pain points at work. And, in my experience, giving and getting feedback is one of the really big ones!

**Rachel Salaman 00:41**

And the good news is that I've talked to many feedback experts over the years. So let's explore their ideas about why feedback often feels so hard, and what we can do about it.

**Jonathan Hancock 00:54**

Well I've collected some great advice about **giving** feedback, so that we can stop fearing performance conversations... know when and how to make comments... and start feeling confident about supporting our people to improve.

**Rachel Salaman 01:08**

And I've gathered the experts' ideas about how to **receive** feedback well. Again, just imagine if we could take some of the stress out of the situation, and really benefit from whatever people have to say about us!

**Jonathan Hancock 01:22**

My immediate feedback, Rachel? That all sounds like a very good plan! [Laughs] So let's get on with it! This is the Mind Tools Expert Voices Podcast: "How Do You Make Feedback Less Painful – and Still Useful?"

So, feedback: enough to strike terror into the bravest of hearts! And even before we get to the advice that you found Rachel about how to **take** feedback, I'm sure we've all felt that fear of having to **deliver** feedback to someone at work. Well, good news: I'm going to start with positivity.

Gretchen Spreitzer is a professor of business administration at the Ross School of Business, and a few years back you talked to her Rachel about the book she edited called "How to Be a Positive Leader: insights from leading thinkers on positive organizations." See what I mean about positivity?! Well your conversation with Gretchen turned to feedback, and the part it plays in helping others perform at their

best. Gretchen told you Rachel that too many leaders worry about seeming unkind and upsetting people. And she said if that's the case, they really need to rethink what being positive is all about.

**Gretchen Spreitzer 02:34**

Being a positive leader isn't being a nice leader, per se. It's being a respectful leader. But it's also trying to help people in organizational systems develop to their full potential. And a piece of that is holding people accountable for their performance.

And giving feedback – both positive and negative feedback – of course is done in a respectful way. But that notion of holding people accountable so that they can grow, develop and get better. And that's just not about being nice to people. It's about oftentimes getting them out of their comfort zone, or having the hard or difficult conversations that are necessary to help people move in a better direction.

**Jonathan Hancock 03:21**

It rings true with me. I think, looking back, the worst managers I've had have been some of the nicest people, but they kind of missed opportunities to challenge me or support me, or see... maybe to show me how I could improve.

**Rachel Salaman 03:33**

Yes. And I think that's actually one of the first things you have to come to terms with when you become a manager: that the days of being nice and trying to be friends with your colleagues are over, or they need to take on a different hue, in that part of your role is to say the difficult things.

**Jonathan Hancock 03:51**

Yes. And you'd maybe hope that, in the long term, people realize **why** you said certain things, even if they were difficult to take at the time. We're not talking about being nasty, of course – I do think though that you can challenge people and even raise uncomfortable truths, sometimes – as long as you're respectful and you show that you care.

Well quite a few of the experts in the Mind Tools archive talk about the **impact** of being scared to give feedback, and some of the ways that we might just try to get out of it. You know: we're just too worried about the prospect... let's go back to being the "nice" manager and avoid that conversation altogether! And one way might be to try and do it anonymously. Something like "360-degree anonymous feedback." Have you come across that?

**Rachel Salaman 04:34**

Controversial! Yes, some people swear by it; other people think it's not worth doing.

**Jonathan Hancock 04:40**

Yes. Well, I've certainly been in organizations that have tried it out. Susan Scott is an expert who is dead against it. She's the founder of Fierce Inc, a global training and consultancy firm. And Rachel you spoke to her about her book "Fierce Leadership." Maybe unsurprisingly she was **not** a fan of giving feedback anonymously!

**Susan Scott** 05:00

In what world would a company or an individual that does value openness and honesty and transparency... would anonymous **anything** be appropriate – except in very, very rare situations? In fact, if we want to be trusted, and we want to trust others, we have to understand that trust requires persistent identity. We must come out from behind ourselves into all of our conversations and make them real, because unreal conversations are incredibly expensive for organizations and individuals.

And so the alternative to anonymous feedback is 365... as in days a year, face-to-face feedback, if at all possible. And if it's not possible face to face, then on the phone, never via email, which is the coward's way out, and almost always backfires.

And so people are afraid to give candid input face to face with someone because they think that people can't handle it or that there will be repercussions. And yet, when you do it skillfully, and with courage, you will be extraordinarily successful, and you will enrich the relationship.

**Jonathan Hancock** 06:21

So there are ways – Susan says – to enrich relationships via feedback, which is very positive. But she says there, as you heard, 360-degree anonymous feedback is not one of them! And I've got to say I would agree. I've tried it. You said you've seen it. Have you actually had a go at it yourself, Rachel?

**Rachel Salaman** 06:36

I don't think I have, no – on either side. I haven't been the giver or the receiver of that.

**Jonathan Hancock** 06:42

Yeah, I've tried it in a few different organizations in several ways. And I'll tell you the one I remember was quite a low-key, laid-back way of doing it. We had a team-building day, it was all very chilled out. And I remember we passed this big beach ball around at one point. And we were all asked to write positive things on the ball about other people in the room, secretly and honestly.

And do you know what? It turned out to be really unsettling! You'd think it'd be quite a nice thing. But it turned out, at least for me, even those positive things can be worrying if you don't know who wrote them.

**Rachel Salaman** 07:13

Yeah, I can completely see that, yeah.

**Jonathan Hancock** 07:14

You sort of look around the room thinking, well, OK, so who said that? And why did they say it, and who **didn't** write about me? And where should I go with any of this? And similar effects, I think, came from those other times it was tried in different organizational ways of providing feedback. But just not knowing who gave it and what to do about it.... I think, for me, it's always been a problem, and always quite unsettling.

**Rachel Salaman** 07:35

Yes, I can completely see that. I'm quite surprised that it's still out there as a practice, because if you don't know who's saying the feedback, who's giving the feedback, then it's vastly reduced in its helpfulness, isn't it?

**Jonathan Hancock 07:48**

You'd think so. I suppose there's a sense that at least it includes everybody, and there's maybe a sort of fairness in giving everybody a say and letting managers get feedback on themselves? I don't know. I'd love to hear from listeners if they've used it. What it's been like for them. Does it have good sides as well as some of these worrying sides that that we've seen or experienced? Why not let us know? Why not tell us what it's been like for you? [Expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com](mailto:Expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com). Why not send us an email: [expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com](mailto:expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com).

So Susan's message was pretty clear there: be brave, and certainly don't do anything anonymously, she says.

Ashley Goodall went one step further than that, because he said: don't do feedback at all! At least in the sense of telling people what they've done, and how they can change it – how they need to change it. That kind of feedback, Ashley says, is old-fashioned, it's pointless, and it can even be dangerous. He made it one of the “nine lies about work” in his book of that name. Here's Ashley explaining why.

**Ashley Goodall 08:48**

Just beneath the surface is this idea that those other people are misguided, aren't they, and we need to help them. They're deluded as to where growth will be for them. And they're not quite sure what to do every day. You sort of begin to wonder, well, why did you hire them in the first place, if they're so completely clueless, and they need telling what to do and telling how to get better at it?!

But the lie is that people need feedback. And it rests on the idea that if I don't tell you how to get better, you're never going to figure it out. And the best way for you to improve is to be more like **me**.

However, if you look at how we learn, we actually learn by building on patterns of behavior in our own brains that are completely idiosyncratic. So firstly you have to start with the person. And then the process of growth, the sort of moment of an “aha,” emerges from inside somebody, it's never compelled from the outside. I can't force you to see something differently. I can share with you my reaction to what you did. And you may or may not have an “aha” if you like, and figure out how to do it in a different way to get a different reaction from somebody.

**Jonathan Hancock 09:55**

So maybe the answer is just to forget traditional feedback altogether! Quite an extreme take from Ashley. But I have to say that his core message – about helping people to see **themselves** what they need to do next – I think that's echoed by many of the experts we'll hear from today. And that sort of collaborative approach as well: that seems to be a theme that's coming through.

**Rachel Salaman 10:24**

What he basically seemed to be saying was, don't try and make everyone like you. And occasionally that might be really helpful, but definitely not always.

**Jonathan Hancock 10:23**

Well, however you decide to support your people's development, don't give them an Oreo! That was the advice of Christine Comaford, a leadership columnist for forbes.com and a guest lecturer at Harvard Business School. And by that she means this very common technique of sandwiching one flavor of feedback between two other bits of a different kind. Here's Christine explaining it, and why she says it just doesn't work.

**Christine Comaford 10:50**

Many of us are taught to give feedback in a way that we say something great, we say something not so great, and then we say something great again. And the brain is like, "What? Am I great? Am I not great? I don't get it."

So what we found with our over 1000 companies that we've worked with is, if we say, "Hey, what's working is..." and we tell them what's working – "You're great at innovation, you always have these cool new ideas," you know, etc, etc. And then, "And what I'd like to see more of is collaboration with a marketing team, like you did with the Sales Team six months ago on Project X." So we're telling them, here's what's working, and here's what I'd like to see more of.

And then we stop talking. Because when we say what's working, they're loading up the visual, auditory, kinesthetic structures of that behavior that you liked. Let them bake on that for a moment.

And then, "And what I'd like to see more of is..." And we tell them the behavior we'd like to see more of is... And if they've never done it, that's where we can give them some suggestions. And we enroll them in actually seeing that desired state.

**Jonathan Hancock 11:56**

Rachel, if I had an Oreo for every time I've been given Oreo feedback... I would have a very big plate of Oreos! [Laughs] And I'm sure I've done it lots of times myself. It's a very tempting thing to do, isn't it? I think there's something very naturally sort of human about wanting to give the good news, and then squeeze in a quick bit of bad news, and then round it off with good news. But those are the reasons why it's problematic. It's confusing, and it's just not the best way forward for people.

**Rachel Salaman 12:20**

Just hearing Christine talk, it just really rang true – made you kind of think, "Aha, yes, of course. That's a much better way of doing it!" And as the giver you can feel just as good about giving feedback like she describes as you would about the Oreo cookie approach.

**Jonathan Hancock 12:38**

Of course, other chocolatey biscuits are available! [Laughs] In moderation, I'm sure they're all absolutely fine for you. But it's a good analogy, I think, for something that is very, very common.

And another of your experts probed a bit more into what the problems are with this kind of feedback – and when there's **any** negativity in there, really. Ken Nowack is President and Chief Research Officer and co-founder of Envisia Learning, a leadership-development company. And he's looked very closely at why so many of us dwell on **any** negative comments we hear, and why that's a problem.

**Ken Nowack 13:11**

One of the patterns that we find that's very interesting are people that rate themselves, relative to others, quite low. They're quite humble. And we label these individuals as “underestimators.” And we find that, in general, they're very hypercritical. And all they want to talk about is the lowest score they find in a feedback report or a performance review or a comment that somebody has written. And we refer to this as being “hypervigilant to the negative.”

**Jonathan Hancock 13:40**

And Ken says these people are everywhere. I'm sure most people know that they do tend to dwell on critical comments out of all proportion. I know I do it. I think it's so common. And he's got the data to back that up. I think we don't always remember that when **we're** the ones giving the feedback. I think that's the important point there: that we know that **we** dwell on negative things, and yet somehow we still think it's OK to give people lots of negative comments – and then off they go, ruminating on them like we would!

**Rachel Salaman 14:06**

Yeah. Like you say, it's just completely natural to just zero in on that negative comment, isn't it?

**Jonathan Hancock 14:11**

Yes. And Ken says that the irony here is that these low self-raters are actually the most effective people on the team!

**Ken Nowack 14:21**

The nice part about these individuals is they're high achievers. So although they're beating themselves up and rating themselves low or relatively low compared to others, we find that they're universally rated pretty high, and their performance is very high. So most leaders tend to ignore these individuals. And again, we just really want to encourage such individuals to look at feedback on balance, and certainly to celebrate life and achievements when they occur, and not move too rapidly to the very next thing on their brass ring.

So we need to slow these individuals down and really do take some time out to recognize what they've achieved and what they've done. And just be sensitive that these are individuals that right away want to talk about and are looking for what I'm **not** doing well. We want to make sure we counterbalance that with great “feedforward” about what they **could** do to become more effective, and at the same time, compliment, recognize and reward their efforts and accomplishments in a very genuine manner.

**Jonathan Hancock 15:21**

I hope you heard that? Our first official mention of one of today's buzz phrases: “feedforward.”

**Rachel Salaman 15:26**

Yes, it jumped out at me.

**Jonathan Hancock 15:28**

So forget feedback, he says: think of feed forward. And I was intrigued to hear just how many of our experts in the archive talk about feeding forward. They love that idea! And it's a real linking thread among so much of their advice, actually. Here's Marc Efron, for example: global HR expert, founder and president of The Talent Strategy Group, and the author of "Eights Steps to High Performance."

**Marc Efron 15:52**

First, most of us don't like getting feedback. It feels painful. It feels like it hurts. And the brain really struggles to deal with feedback. Because, if Rachel is giving me feedback, you're telling me: "Hey Marc, here's some stuff you've done in the past that you haven't done that well."

And the challenge is I can't correct anything that happens in the past. And so our brains are pretty rational. They like to fix things. And when you bring me something I've done in the past, I can't fix that: it's already over.

Feedforward says, "Well let's stand that concept on its head." And if the goal is to help Marc perform better in the future, why don't we simply say, "Hey Marc, going forward, it would be great in team meetings if you spoke up a bit more – you tend to be a bit quiet. And I think you'll be much more successful if your good ideas are heard by other people." Now that feedforward suggestion gets me the exact same result – Marc tends to speak up more in team meetings – as the feedback "Hey Marc, you don't talk enough in team meetings." So I get at least the same result. But what doesn't happen is my brain doesn't struggle to deal with that feedback.

**Rachel Salaman 17:00**

It's actually very like what Christine Comaford was saying, isn't it? That here's what you did well; this is what I'd like to see more of.

**Jonathan Hancock 17:09**

Yeah. I'd love to hear what listeners think about that. And if people have tried feeding forward. What difference has it made?

**Rachel Salaman 17:15**

Yes, please tell us – at [expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com](mailto:expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com).

**Jonathan Hancock 17:20**

So whether you focus on feeding forwards or backwards, or whatever your particular type of performance conversation needs to be where you work, let's get some core advice on how to do it in the moment. Anna Wildman is a former Global Director of Learning at KPMG, founder of a performance-management-skills company, and the author of "Now You're Talking: the manager's complete handbook to leading great conversations at work, even the tough ones." And Rachel, I was

really glad that you asked Anna about whether you should ever script a conversation, just to make sure you get every word right. I know that can be very tempting. Well, Anna said, definitely **don't**.

**Anna Wildman** 18:02

Using scripts distances us. As if to say, “This isn't me talking to you as I might normally do, day to day; it's the process telling you this.” And it's not necessary to have that glass wall between you and your people.

Our words need to be authentic, to us and to our staff. They need to be respectful. The best way I can describe it is to be “on the level” with the person that you're talking to, so that you're not talking down, and you're encouraging them to look at you as an equal in solving the problem of the conversation.

**Jonathan Hancock** 18:40

Yeah, I like that – again that collaborative side. It sounds like a really good way of doing it. Not easy, if you've not done that before – if you've always thought of feedback as being something that you “deliver.” But I did like that concept of it becoming more of a conversation.

**Rachel Salaman** 18:54

Yes. “On the level.” That's quite a useful thing to remember, isn't it?

**Jonathan Hancock** 18:58

Definitely. And as well as saying don't use scripts, Anna said don't do feedback at all in two key situations. First, she said, when it's about someone's personality, rather than their behavior.

**Anna Wildman** 19:10

Because if there's been a mismatch with their personality, and they're not going to be able to change it, then the feedback isn't appropriate. In that case, you need to try and find a better fit.

But the single biggest instance in which you don't need to give a formal developmental feedback conversation is if you could just coach the individual. Just sit down and say, “This is an important part of your job. Let's go through some of the skills you need to be able to take this to the next level.”

**Jonathan Hancock** 19:42

And Susan Weinschenk really builds on a lot of that, with her practical advice for these conversations **while** you're having them. She wrote the wonderfully straightforward book “How to Get People to Do Stuff.” And Rachel she told you her three secrets for giving feedback well.

**Susan Weinschenk** 19:59

One is that you really need to give feedback right away. So in the case of the person who's learning to be a barista, if they're new at the job... and at the end of the day I sit down with them, and now tell them everything they did right and everything they did wrong... that's not going to be as effective as if I can catch them right after they've done a particular task and give them feedback right then.



And it's important to do – in what we call in psychological terms – “elaboration.” So the feedback should not just be, “You did that wrong,” or, “You did that right.” But there needs to be information in there. Again, if someone is trying to master something, you need to give them information, so they know how to adjust what they did. So you need to say, “You didn't rinse out the filter correctly. In order to rinse it out correctly you have to take it off and do this and do that.”

And then the third part – that I think people often get wrong – is that you don't want to connect praise with the feedback. When you praise someone for something, and then right after that you tell them how you want them to do it differently, it actually confuses them. It's like, “Well, did I do it right, or did I do it wrong?”, you know. And when you're using “desire for mastery,” praise is a reward, and you don't need to give rewards: you're using desire for mastery instead of reward.

**Jonathan Hancock 21:28**

Maybe another phrase to remember from today's podcast: “desire for mastery”! Using that instead of reward. So she's meaning there really the opportunity to get really good at something **is** the big positive. You've just pointed it out to your person, so you don't need to back it up with anything else. You've given them a reward by helping them see how they can improve.

It's worth a try. And I can see myself **learning** to do that – even if it didn't come naturally. I think my natural instinct might be to just add an extra bit of praise afterwards as well!

**Rachel Salaman 21:57**

And I'm not sure there's anything wrong with that! I mean, I hesitate to contradict Susan there [laughs] but I think a little bit of praise goes a long way, if it's authentic and based on the evidence.

**Jonathan Hancock 22:09**

Yeah. And obviously you spoke to Frances Frei, who's my final guest. And so this is all part of me ending on a nice upbeat note as well. It brings us full circle: I started with a positive person, and ending my section here with Frances who's a professor at Harvard Business School, a multimillion-view TED Talk presenter, and – with Ann Morris – the author of “Unleashed: the unapologetic leader's guide to empowering everyone around you.” She says the best way to take the pain out of giving feedback, and make it more useful than ever actually, is to put your effort into seeing those great things that people do, and telling them about them – a lot!

**Frances Frei 22:44**

Positive reinforcement. It's not, like... it's not false optimism. It's not, like, “Oh, good job. Oh, you're so great.” That doesn't help anyone.

But here's the thing. I do 100 things in a day. I don't know which 10 of those were most effective. But whichever 10 of them were most effective, I want to do more of those tomorrow than I did today. So positive reinforcement is letting people know which of the things you're currently doing should you do more of. So if you want to give constructive advice once a week, have at it! But make sure you're giving positive reinforcement once a day: constructive advice once a month, positive reinforcement once a week.

And what I hear from people is, “Oh my gosh, that will take so long.” Once you get good at it, it takes about eight to 10 seconds. Every single person who has tried it comes back and is like, “Oh my gosh, not only do other people get better, they’re happier. And I’m happier.” Because getting to focus on what people are doing right... they do it more often, they get better, and it sparks joy for both of us.

**Jonathan Hancock** 23:49

So when feedback is done well, it can spark joy for the giver and the receiver. What a lovely, hopeful prospect!

**Rachel Salaman** 24:56

Yes, isn't it?

**Jonathan Hancock** 24:57

She thinks it's the secret of enjoying giving feedback, but also getting more out of it. So it's like our double aim today, isn't it? To take the pain out of it, and to still make it useful, so it actually drives your team forward to success.

So, according to my experts, giving feedback well is about seeing what a difference it can make when you carefully choose what to say and when and how to say it. We need to have respectful, authentic conversations – “on the level” – where we help people see the way forward for themselves. We mustn't confuse their brains by mixing positive and negative comments, especially as the best people will likely dwell on anything they perceive as critical. And instead of feeding back, we should maybe think about feeding forward, so that people have a clear picture of what to do: where to go to improve and grow. Our comments should be made in the moment, so that people understand and remember them. And we've got to give enough praise – as we were just hearing there from Frances – if people are going to want to keep getting better. And that should also make the manager's part of the process that much more positive.

**Rachel Salaman** 25:03

And easier, according to Frances, too!

And if **you're** often the giver of feedback – or feedforward, I should say – do these tips sound good to you? Maybe you've got your own ways of doing it, or useful experiences to share? Well, we'd love to hear your ideas and stories. So why not send us a quick email? We're at [expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com](mailto:expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com).

**Jonathan Hancock** 25:28

Absolutely: we would welcome feedback on... well, feedback, which is our focus today! It's also a big theme in our vast library of resources at Mind Tools. We explore the dos and don'ts of feedback, in articles, videos, infographics, workbooks, quizzes, and of course, the full-length Expert Interviews we're dipping into here. So if you're not already a subscriber, or get access through work, maybe now is the time to join us! Find out how, and see all the other ways we can boost your professional performance and personal success, at [mindtools.com](http://mindtools.com).

**Rachel Salaman 26:05**

OK, so it's my turn now to tackle the question we've set ourselves: how to make feedback less painful and still useful. And I'm coming at this from the recipient's point of view. And I think most people would agree that there's more pain for the receiver of feedback than the giver – wouldn't you agree, Jonathan?

**Jonathan Hancock 26:26**

Yeah, I think so. For all I've been looking after the managers, it is the person at the other end who generally needs a bit more help!

**Rachel Salaman 26:32**

Yes. Well, the pain might come from fear and anxiety because you don't know what you're going to hear – especially if we're expecting poor feedback; or coming to terms with failure if we get bad or what they might call “constructive” feedback; and then trying to bounce back from disappointment in a productive way. It's all quite difficult.

So I searched the archives for insight into how we can take away some of that pain and replace it with something positive and helpful. And I found some great stuff, you'll be glad to hear!

**Jonathan Hancock 27:05**

Good!

**Rachel Salaman 27:07**

First off, we need to get into the right frame of mind to receive feedback, which often means: don't be scared. I talked to the psychologist Pippa Grange, who worked with the England men's soccer team in the 2018 World Cup. And she's the author of a book called “Fear Less.”

She explained that, when you're scared – like when you're going to get feedback – some very basic survival responses take over. We go into “flight, fight or freeze” mode. And that's driven by a part of the brain called the amygdala.

**Pippa Grange 27:43**

Because fear comes from the amygdala, and from what I describe as the “old” circuitry in our brains, it does hijack us. And you need to take back control. We need to sort of engage other parts of our brain, the “new” circuitry, in bringing in rational thought to dismiss the anxiety – to work through it and be able to rationally say, “Well, no, actually there isn't anything that's pressingly fear-provoking here. It's just my emotion.” It's just fear, literally. And to be able to rationalize yourself back to where you want to be.

**Rachel Salaman 28:19**

Which sounds great, doesn't it? But it's actually easier said than done, I think, for most people. And if you find that too hard – to “rationalize” yourself out of your fear – you can try some physical tricks too, Pippa says, as you psych up to a feedback session. I think you could probably do this **during** your feedback session, too, surreptitiously.

**Jonathan Hancock** 28:42

I might do it while she's explaining it!

**Rachel Salaman** 28:45

[Laughs] Good idea! Try it.

**Pippa Grange** 28:46

A cool, deep breath. Or let's say in a situation where you're feeling overly activated, you might want to just take 10 cool, deep breaths. Put the four corners of your feet on the floor. Make sure that you're dropping your shoulders, relaxing your jaw, unclenching your hands. And just take 10 deep breaths, to actually process it.

**Rachel Salaman** 29:09

How did that work?

**Jonathan Hancock** 29:10

Oh, it felt lovely. I feel so calm. I'm ready for anything you can throw at me now! I think, actually... I do think it's a really good thing. I think physically changing your state can have such a big impact on your mental and emotional state.

**Rachel Salaman** 29:22

Yes, exactly. It's all about getting in the right frame of mind. Your attitude. And when you're about to get feedback, the main thing, of course, is that you need to be open minded and willing to change. Otherwise, what's the point of the feedback session?

This is something that came up when I spoke to Bill Wooditch. He's a speaker, a CEO, entrepreneur, coach, and the author of the bestseller "Fail More." He was really reflective, actually, about the importance of having the right attitude to feedback.

**Bill Wooditch** 29:55

I think that you've got to be willing to change. I've been able to change my mindset, to a degree, but some of it is that confirmation bias I carry with me on how I think the world should be. And so when I can distance myself from that parochial thought – that this is what I know – and I can follow my "inner Plato" when he was asked, you know, "You're the wisest man in Greece," you know, "What is... how do you know so much?" And he said, "I know that I **don't** know."

When you're willing to accept that you don't know, when you're willing to open the gates to possibility, you can change your mindset to a degree. But if I'm going to change someone else's, it ain't gonna happen!

**Rachel Salaman** 30:37

[Laughs] At the end there he touched on the other person in the feedback conversation, and the relationship you might have with the person you're getting feedback from. You're probably not going to change their mindset. That's useful, isn't it?

**Jonathan Hancock 30:50**

That is so important in this: just the people, real people involved in this feedback process. I like the idea of his “inner Plato” – I might try and bring out my inner Plato a bit more.

**Rachel Salaman 31:00**

[Laughs] We all need one of those!

**Jonathan Hancock 31:02**

We do! But also that bravery as well – because I do think it does take bravery, to be that open to change and not to hold on to your success and the things you **can** do, but sort of be open to failure and open to learning new things. It takes bravery.

And I think maybe I've been a bit “solution focused” over the years. And so when somebody suggests something that I could do better, I think: “Right, well, let's quickly find a solution to that,” rather than taking that sort of moment to think about what it means – and really embracing that as an opportunity to get better in more ways than just that one specific thing that hasn't gone very well.

**Rachel Salaman 31:36**

Yes. And I think a large part of that is about **listening** well – having that humble and receptive mindset, so that you can actually hear what people are telling you.

So who better to turn to now then, but the author of a book called “Just Listen”?! And that's the psychiatrist and executive coach Mark Goulston.

**Mark Goulston 31:59**

My favorite quote of all times comes from a British psychoanalyst named Wilfred Bion. “The purest form of communication is to listen without memory or desire.” Because when you listen with memory, you're listening with an old agenda that you're trying to plug people into. And when you listen with desire, you're listening with a new agenda that you're trying to plug them into. But in both cases, you're not listening to what's on **their** mind. And so there's actually a training that I offer called “Be a PAL,” which is Purposeful Agenda-less Listening.

**Rachel Salaman 32:40**

It's not the catchiest phrases [laughs] but it's a really useful one, I think: “purposeful, agenda-less listening.”

**Jonathan Hancock 32:48**

Yeah. It sounds simple in a way; I know in practice it's really hard. I just think these days, especially when we get used to a lot of our communication being at a distance... and I just think listening takes a

bit of a backseat when people are waiting for their opportunity to say their thing, or not wanting there to be any silence in conversations.

Again, I think it's bravery, isn't it? It comes down to just being able to pause, listen carefully, not have an answer ready immediately – or, in my case, like not having a solution ready immediately – but having the space to really think: what is that person saying? What is the meaning of it in that moment?

**Rachel Salaman 33:26**

And I think it's also about our old friends self-control and self-awareness, because that will determine how well we can listen, I think.

So if we **are** able to actively listen to the feedback, and we're trying to marshal our rational mind – so we can process what's being said, without “amygdala hijack” – then then your manager starts on the developmental bit. And what you hear is that you failed.

So I thought getting some tips from our experts about resilience and rebounding from failure might be really useful here. I'm going to start with the leading businessman and advisor Tony Tjan, who wrote the book “Heart, Smarts, Guts, and Luck,” with Dick J. Harrington and Tsun-yan Hsieh. Now, they developed a five-step framework for dealing with failure, or for dealing with getting what feels like negative feedback.

**Tony Tjan 34:23**

When people fail, one of the five questions we put forth is, “Are you being ‘macromyopic’?” And that is a fancy buzzword, I guess, to say, “Are you overestimating the short-term impact of the situation? And underestimating, you know, the long-term learning?” Or, you know, “Are you basically giving it too much weight in the short term?”

Everyone tends to have a bias towards amplifying things in the short run. So that is one question. We also say, “Is this really your true north? Was it something that you really cared about, towards your success and calling? Or was it something that you were more driven by – or asked to do – by someone else? Did that impact you? Was this something that really was your personal motivation? Or was it just a task someone else asked you to do? Was the standard reasonable?”

Third question, you know, was: “Was this benchmark of success reasonable? Or was it a stretch goal?” Many managers out there struggle with goal setting, and you know they want to put very, very high stretch goals. And that's an art and a science to get at that right level to motivate people to understand “how high high could be” – with not letting people “sandbag.”

So just understanding what is a reasonable standard to exist. And reflecting: was that standard reasonable? Did you try your best? Did you do everything possible to help succeed in this goal?” Think about it: did you really? And that will help you understand more about the failure.

And that leads to the last one. We say: “What can you really learn from this? What do you take away?”

I think those five questions help people build perspective and awareness over time.

**Rachel Salaman 36:08**

I really like this model, Jonathan, because it allows for the fact that your manager might not be right! Like, maybe the goals weren't realistic.

**Jonathan Hancock 36:16**

I guess you do have to be a bit careful! In some places, disagreeing with your boss could get you fired! But I do think this model gives you a good chance to do that reflection and that “self-feedback” that some of the experts I picked out from the archives were talking about. And you've got that five-question checklist – I like that – so you can think about what the feedback means for you, what you think **about** it – and what is the best way to respond.

**Rachel Salaman 37:42**

Yes. Well, another of our experts who thinks we shouldn't necessarily take all feedback as gospel is the business professor Brad Staats. He's the author of “Never Stop Learning: stay relevant, reinvent yourself, and thrive.” He starts by backing up something **your** experts were saying, Jonathan: ditch the “Oreo cookie” model!

**Brad Staats 37:04**

So we have our annual review with someone, and it's: “Let me tell you what you're bad at a little bit. You know, I'll give you a little bit of good to make you feel, you know, OK; then I'll give you a whole bunch of bad – and then a little bit of good to leave on the other side. Kind of a classic “feedback sandwich.”

But we end up demotivating people and focusing on the wrong things. So what I'd say is, right, if somebody comes to you and they want you to fix a weakness, there's a question of, well, is this a critical weakness? Is this weakness necessary for me to do the job – for me to thrive and succeed? And if it is, then great, I need to decide: OK, do I want to fill it? Or should I actually go look somewhere else?

Now obviously, in the moment, if you're someone with a boss who's saying, “Brad, you have to fix this,” then don't give him the book and say, “Ha! He tells me I don't have to.” But, you know, I think the broader picture here is, when we play to our strengths, it really lets us differentiate ourselves; it really lets us learn at faster rates, rather than trying to fix things that, you know, we're likely never going to be that good at.

**Rachel Salaman 38:06**

I think what he's basically saying, Jonathan, is that it's up to us to prioritize what we hear when we get feedback. And in his view, you'll do better to minimize the feedback about your weaknesses and focus on your strengths – even if your boss asks you to fix a weakness. What do you think?

**Jonathan Hancock 38:24**

Yeah. And again I suppose it has to be a collaboration, because it requires the boss to be offering useful information, doesn't it? If there **is** a serious weakness, the boss needs to make that very clear.

There's no point in your boss telling you something that's absolutely vital, and you deciding it's not worthwhile! So you've got to be on the same page to a certain extent. But I love this dynamic idea of both sides sort of pitching what they think is important. And then the person whose job it is to go and make a difference has a big say in it – has the ultimate say, I guess – in deciding how they're going to react **to** it, and what they're actually going to do **because** of it.

**Rachel Salaman** 39:00

Yes. It gives a little bit more power back to the receiver, doesn't it?

**Jonathan Hancock** 39:04

I wonder if managers listening to this, though, are now starting to think, “Oh, this is much more complicated than I thought!” Because we’re now empowering their people to be taking much more of a role. But I think it has to be a good thing on both sides, because both sides want the same thing, you would assume, wouldn’t you – that they want people to succeed, they want the organization to succeed. So it's just interesting to see from both sides what that dynamic conversation might have to be like.

**Rachel Salaman** 39:27

And a manager could think, well, it takes a bit more of the weight off them.

**Jonathan Hancock** 39:29

Absolutely. You don't have to say that much do you? I think that's one of the things I've learned, thinking about this, hearing these experts... is that giving feedback in the past, I've possibly said too much. I could have just sown a few seeds and then paused and just sort of sat back and helped the person do the work.

**Rachel Salaman** 39:47

Interesting. Well, we heard Brad Staats there, very categorically advising us to focus on our strengths. But what's really interesting, Jonathan, is that another of our experts, the Yale lecturer Emma Seppala, who wrote “The Happiness Track”... she thinks exactly the opposite. Listen to this.

**Emma Seppala** 40:05

It's of course important and great to know what you are good at, right? But the problem is that when your people believe that they have certain strengths, like I'm a good speaker, or I'm a good mathematician, or so forth, is that they somehow believe they have this inborn talent for those things, which means that they don't have talent for other things. So if you go around thinking that, then you're less likely to actually learn a new thing, new skills, and you're less likely to be resilient in the face of failure. Because whenever there's a failure, you interpret it as something you simply cannot be good at.

Now, if you walk around, not thinking about that, just thinking about understanding what science really shows, which is that our brain is plastic and malleable and is built to learn new skills – if you understand that fully, then you will also be more likely to expand your repertoire of skills, and you'll be more likely to be resilient in the face of failure, because you'll know that, OK, I just need to try harder, or I need to



learn this a little better. And so you're less likely to be depressed and anxious in the face of failure or challenge, and actually take it as an opportunity – as an adventure to expand your knowledge.

**Rachel Salaman 41:16**

Which were you more convinced by? Focus on your strengths, or focus on your weaknesses?

**Jonathan Hancock 41:22**

It has to be both doesn't it? I mean, it's going to be probably easier to focus on your strengths. But I do see that thing about resilience – gaining resilience from being able to think about and cope with weaknesses. And I think that reminded me a lot of the “growth mindset” concept as well – Carol Dweck’s big idea that we've got lots of resources about at Mind Tools. I think that is a big way to build resilience.

**Rachel Salaman 41:44**

Yes, I think that's right. It's all about balance really, isn't it? But talking about resilience, and learning from experience and feedback, that reminds me of such a useful anecdote that I read in a book called “Bet on You” by Angie Morgan and Courtney Lynch. We'll hear from Angie in a minute actually. But in her book, she says that her dad was a school principal. And he used to talk about two types of teachers: those with 20 years of experience, and those with one year of experience repeated 20 times. I love that! I can immediately think of lots of people I've worked with who don't seem to have learned anything, despite their so-called experience.

**Jonathan Hancock 42:29**

[Laughs] That's funny: I was once a school principal and I had literally one year of experience! So I think I am that person! It'd be interesting if I carried on in that role – whether I would have just repeated the same year! I think that is very tempting to do – especially if things go well. And I think that's maybe what draws me a bit back to Emma Seppala's idea there, about **using** things that don't go so well. And the other experts have talked about embracing failure – that you can use those. And when people point them out to you, there's opportunity there, as long as it's done in a way that you can cope with, and you don't get completely sidetracked into thinking you can't do it – and you give up.

**Rachel Salaman 43:01**

Yes – you have to actively set out to learn from your experiences. I talked to Patricia Walsh, who's a top-flight athlete, an award-winning computer engineer, and she's also the author of a book called “Blind Ambition,” referring to the fact that she's been blind since the age of 14. Here's what she told me.

**Patricia Walsh 43:23**

We all think people learn from experience. And what I heard recently that I loved is that we don't learn from experience unless we evaluate our experience. So, in understanding our own limitations, it's a matter of adding a practice of evaluating our experience, such that we actually can learn from them.

So having some awareness of our limitations, and then providing ourselves opportunity to practice – which is gaining experience – and then adding the step of evaluating that experience... is how we can, as individuals and as leaders, overcome our perceived limitations.

**Rachel Salaman 43:57**

And while you're evaluating your experiences, you do need to be kind to yourself, so you don't get into a negative spiral. And quite a few of our experts talked about self-compassion during this potentially painful evaluation and learning process. One is Josh Linkner, the author of "Big Little Breakthroughs," who's an expert in the creative process.

**Josh Linkner 44:23**

I think it's critical to recognize that there is no real breakthroughs without some stumbles along the way. In other words, setbacks and failure are sort of part of the process. And it's important that we recognize it: not aiming for failure, but recognizing that that's part of the route to getting to success.

You know, it's funny, when we hear other people's stumbles, we extend compassion. But when we screw something up ourselves, we tend to be very hypercritical. And I would suggest that when we can give ourselves the freedom to fail, the compassion that it was a well-intentioned shot you missed, but you learned and grew from it... that's a much more long-term, productive approach: not to enable failure more, but ultimately, to enable success.

**Jonathan Hancock 45:05**

Rachel, I used to work with somebody who had this beautiful poster on her office wall, and it was Michael Jordan, one of the greatest-ever basketball players. And a quote from him about the fact that he'd missed 9000 shots, I think it was, and lost more than 300 games. And it was part of a speech I think he gave about that thing about failure: you need to have those misses and those losses to become the greatest of all time. And that's how you learn. And it made me think of Edison as well, you know, who famously said he hadn't failed 10,000 times to invent something; he'd just found 10,000 ways that don't work! So each of those is a discovery, and it's all leading us on the way to something successful.

**Rachel Salaman 45:44**

Yes. It's a way to turn it around, isn't it? And of course, not all feedback is negative or "developmental." That's definitely the more painful kind. But we do sometimes get positive feedback that leaves us feeling great, don't we? Dancing on air. So I think I'll give the last word to Angie Morgan, whose dad had that excellent observation about actively learning from experience. She says we should give our wins just as much attention as our failures.

**Angie Morgan 46:15**

Winning happens all the time. We have to be present for it. And the reason it's so important is it fuels us, it gives us inspiration, it ignites our confidence. It makes us find satisfaction. Being able to say to yourself, like, "This is what winning feels like to me." Being present for our wins is a great reminder that we have success in our life, and we can use that to fuel, again, our confidence, our inspiration, our day to day.

**Rachel Salaman 46:44**

Angie Morgan with that sunny thought. So we've gone from controlling fear and “amygdala hijack” with Pippa Grange, to basking in success with Angie Morgan. And along the way, Jonathan, we heard tips on being open minded, and listening well, analyzing and prioritizing the feedback that we get – so we focus on the really useful things, so we can learn and move forward. And to do that with self-compassion, and an awareness that there's no success without some disappointment along the way.

**Jonathan Hancock 47:19**

And after all of that, you and I Rachel should be in a great place to receive people's feedback on this podcast! [Laughs] So let us have it! What sparked your enthusiasm, made you raise an eyebrow, or even got your goat in what you've heard today?

**Rachel Salaman 47:33**

And what would you add to this collection of ideas and insights, from your own experience? Please let us know by emailing [expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com](mailto:expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com).

**Jonathan Hancock 47:44**

Which is exactly what Steve Jorgensen did from the U.S. after listening to our last episode, which was about how to stop wasting the day. Now Steve says that his number one tip for this is to tell someone what you're going to do. He says: “I spent too long telling **myself**, via to-do lists. But I found it works way better to tell a colleague or even a family member what I'm going to do – for important tasks, at least, he says. “Then I feel committed, like they're going to hold me accountable.”

I thought that was a really good tip there to add to the list of other things that the experts told us about deciding what you're going to do, and then getting on and doing it. Steve says, well, tell someone what you're going to do and make them hold you accountable.

**Rachel Salaman 48:26**

Yeah, that is a really good one. We also had a great comment on that episode from one of our colleagues at Mind Tools, Charlie Swift. He really didn't like the expert tip about combining difficult tasks with pleasurable activities that we got from Greg McKeown. Do you remember? He took his calls in his hot tub! Charlie said, “I'd hate to spoil the bath, that radio program, the comfy chair etc. by doing a hated or feared task at the same time. The one would contaminate the other, not be improved by it,” he says.

**Jonathan Hancock 49:02**

Yeah, I can see that. I can see it could go both ways. Personally, I do still find it easier to do something hard in a nice place. But then I'd also want to do nice things that didn't involve work at all. I see that; I see where he's going with that. Don't always bring your work into the things that you would love to do in the day. But maybe sometimes it does make them a bit easier.

It's good to see that people are going back to those earlier episodes – which are all still there alongside this one, on topics like putting together teams in the post-pandemic workplace, and how to deal with pay conversations in tough economic times. In fact, Alex Napier sent us some feedback about that one, about pay. Alex said, “It got me thinking about the importance of financial clarity across an organization.

If everyone knows how well the business is doing, what challenges it faces and what its key financial strategies are, that should make it much easier to know when to ask for more, and how to respond if someone's asking **you**."

"And by the way," Alex adds at the end, "extend that clarity to putting salary numbers in job adverts, too! Have open conversations about what you're offering and why from the very start." And I know there is quite a campaign about that on social media at the moment. So maybe we could look into that in a future episode – and take on other people's workplace bugbears, too.

**Rachel Salaman 50:17**

Yes, we'd love to hear your suggestions for future topics. We've certainly got plenty of experts on hand, thanks to the Mind Tools interview archives. So let us know your ideas, plus feedback on any of our episodes so far. Email [expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com](mailto:expertvoicespodcast@mindtools.com).

**Jonathan Hancock 50:36**

Remember to explore all our resources on feedback in the toolkit. There's a whole Skillbook about giving feedback, and a quiz you can take to see how good your feedback skills are at the moment. And also see what other pain points we might be able to help you out with! If you're not already a subscriber, find out how to change that quickly at [mindtools.com](http://mindtools.com).

**Rachel Salaman 50:57**

And we'll be back with another Mind Tools Expert Voices Podcast very soon. See you then Jonathan!

**Jonathan Hancock 51:03**

Look forward to it. And now let's go off and give each other some useful but pain-free feedback about today's episode. Let's go through it moment by moment... [Laughs]