



# The Look & Sound of Leadership™

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## UNBLOCKING FEEDBACK

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This month's coaching conversation follows a client as he works to shrink his blind spot through feedback. He and Tom discuss lowering the barriers that stop us all from taking in feedback.

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### Shrinking your blind spot

Martin was disruptive. There was a long history of complaints against him. After the most recent grievance meeting, he was "given" a coach: me.

The fact that people were upset with him was something Martin knew the way a reckless driver, seeing chaos in his rearview mirror, wonders how all THAT happened. Because he didn't understand his contribution to the upset, he was unable to keep it from happening again.

Martin knew he was stuck in a loop but didn't understand how to stop it. What he was beginning to understand was that his lack of understanding might possibly cost him his job.

I'd shared a tool with him – [The Johari Window](#) – that helps people see into their blind spots.

Thinking about blind spots, he said, "You're saying this problem of mine is something everyone knows about me, but I don't know it about myself. It's my blind spot. But that's why you're here, right? You're going to shrink my blind spot."



“No,” I said, “*you’re* going to shrink your blind spot. But I’m happy to help.”

“How’m I going to do that?” he asked.

I said, “I’d like you to begin by hearing some feedback. People around here tell me they’ve given you feedback, but my sense is that the message isn’t really clear to you yet. Which is not a blaming statement, Martin. Actually, I think you’re pretty normal. I think most people find feedback hard to hear.”

Defensively he said, “I can tell you everything they said in that meeting, if you want.”

I held up my palms in surrender. “I’m sure! Listen, by the time we’re adults, I think we’ve all put up barriers to protect us from feedback. I think barriers are natural.”

He gave a snort. “My teenage daughter is a perfect example. She can’t hear anything I say anymore.”

“And you’re trying to be helpful, right?” I asked.

“If she’d let me. But it’s not worth it. If she doesn’t want my help, fine! Whatever!”

“How old is she?” I asked.

“Fourteen,” he said.

### **Two barriers to feedback**

“My heart goes out to her. Think about being fourteen. We were tested and graded and evaluated. People told us all the ways we were lacking, at school and at home. At fourteen, who doesn’t barricade themselves against all that feedback?” I asked.

“By the way, she does it with my wife, too. It’s not just me.”

“And I’m saying that’s natural, Martin. But *we* are not fourteen. As adults, unless we learn to lower those barriers and take in feedback, an entire part of ourselves can’t grow. Listen, you can be as introspective as you want.





That's great. But introspection only grows you in relationship to yourself. If you're going to grow in relation to others, you have to be able to take in feedback. Doubly true if you want to be a leader."

Again, defensively, he said, "If they would just tell me what they really want, I'd do it. But they keep talking about respect. I respect Maribel. I do! And I talk to her the same way I talk to everyone else. What do they want from me?"

"That, Martin, is the perfect question. What do people want from you? I think the answer is out there for you, and I would like to help you find it."

"How?" he asked.

"I'd like to help you think about lowering the barriers against feedback so you can really take it in."

"You think I don't," he said.

"I don't know. Let's find out. You willing?"

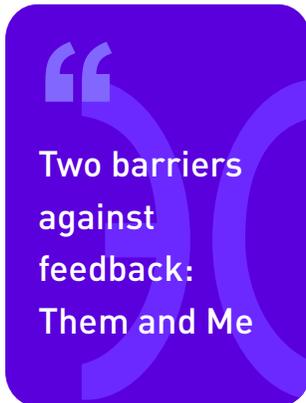
"I guess," he said.

"Okay. So let's start with a goal in mind. The goal of this little exercise is to lower barriers against feedback so you can take it in. When you take in feedback, it lands you in a place where you take responsibility for the meaning. You store it in your brain and can report it back later accurately. You are curious. You clarify. You ask questions. That's the goal, okay?"

"Okay," he said.

I went on. "You and I are going to talk about two barriers. I think everybody has them, and I think we all can work on lowering both."

"Alright," he said.



### 'Them' and 'Me'

I said. "These barriers are called 'Them' and 'Me.'"

"Two sides of the same coin," he laughed.

"In this case, for sure! And either one can stop you from taking in feedback. But there are ways to lower them. Let's start with 'Them.' Sometimes you get a piece of feedback from someone and you think, 'You!? *You* are going to give me feedback?'"

Are you kidding? What makes you think I would listen to anything you have to say?"

He laughed, "My first wife!"

"There you go! We all have people like that in our lives. If we don't value the other person, we won't value their feedback. We barricade ourselves against 'Them.'"

"With her? Damn straight. I wouldn't take any feedback from her," he said amused.

"My point exactly. Your 'Them' barrier is stopping you from taking in any feedback your ex might have for you."

"You don't know her!" he said.

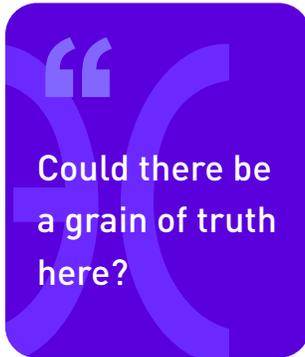
"True," I laughed. "But just because you don't like someone doesn't mean their feedback isn't valuable. What if both were true?"

"It'd still be hard to hear from her," he said.

"What if I said that's your 'Them' barrier talking? You dismiss them so it's easier to dismiss their feedback. Your 'Them' barrier just gave you a great reason for not taking in the feedback."

"Then what am I supposed to do?" he asked.

"First, you have to notice your 'Them' barrier. You say, 'Oh! I'm making it all about *them* instead of what they're



telling me.’ Then, even though you don’t like the person, ask questions. Ask them to clarify. Say it back to them and see if they think you’re accurate.”

“We’d argue about that for an hour!” he said.

“Oh! Well, I’m not suggesting that! But later you can ask yourself, is it possible I might have contributed to whatever she told me? Could there be a grain of truth here?”

Suspiciously, he asked, “And if there is?”

“Then you start to notice where else that shows up in your life. The feedback is out there for you if you can take it in.”

### The ‘Me’ barrier

“You make it sound easy.”

“Maybe it will be!” I said. “Can I tell you about the second barrier. The ‘Me’ barrier? It has two parts. The first part is about Truth-with-a-capital-T. Have you ever had someone tell you something about yourself and you knew they were just plain wrong?”

“Yes!” he said. “Like when they’re talking to me about respect,” he said. “I really do respect her! I do! They’re wrong!”

I nodded. “Martin, that certainty – that feeling that the feedback simply isn’t be true – that is the ‘Me’ barrier talking to you” The ‘Me’ barrier says, ‘No, that’s not true! That’s not me!’ And once again, instead of taking in the feedback, you have permission to dismiss it.”

He said, “It feels real to me!”

I agreed. “Of course! Yes, the feeling is real. But the message *attached* to the feeling is not. It is not the ‘Truth.’”

“Then what can I ever do?” he asked.



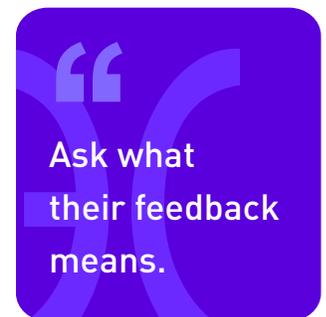
I said, “Same as before. Notice the feeling. When you hear yourself saying, ‘I don’t do that!’ recognize that as a predictable barrier. Ask questions about it. Be curious.”

“Take the feedback in, right?” he said tentatively.

“Right,” I said. Then, I asked him, “Martin, can you define that a little for me? What does ‘taking in the feedback’ mean to you right now?”

He looked down, then said in an uncertain tone, “Ask questions about the feedback?”

“Sure. Can I tell what that might sound like? Picture yourself in that meeting, hearing their feedback. They say respect is a problem. You think ‘It is not! That’s wrong.’ When you hear that in your head, force yourself to ask questions. Ask them to help you understand what their feedback means.”



“They’ll just say I’m defensive,” he said.

“If you debate their feedback and argue with them, yes,” I said. “But if you genuinely want to understand what they’re saying, I don’t think they’d feel that way.”

I went on, saying, “The second portion of the ‘Me’ barrier is self-talk. Our inner monologue. All the things we tell ourselves. Let’s say part of my self-talk is that I’m a screw-up. I’ve been telling myself I’m a screw-up since I was a kid. It becomes part of my self-image. I don’t like it – it makes me feel bad about myself – but it is part of me as I grow up.

“Now, when I’m thirty and I have a job, and someone at work gives me feedback, it doesn’t take much for me to start telling myself I’m a screw up. The feedback gets connected to my identity. Now, instead of dismissing the feedback, it gets super-charged. My ‘Me’ barrier has kicked in and stopped me from taking in the feedback.”

“Is there a workaround?” he asked.

“Same as before. Be curious. Ask questions. Challenge yourself. Did they really say I’m a screw-up? Really?”



Work at reporting accurately.”

“And this is going to shrink my blind spot?” he asked.

“If you start taking in feedback? Yes, I think it will,” I answered.

Martin’s homework, between this conversation and our next, was to seek out some feedback. When he heard it, what did he tell himself about it? Could he ask questions about what he heard? Could he report it to me accurately at our next session? That conversation, following Martin’s deepening journey into his blind spot, is next month’s installment of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

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**Core Concepts:**

- We are all barricaded against feedback
- We cannot grow as leaders without taking in feedback
- Often we dismiss feedback because we dismiss the giver
- Often we dismiss feedback because we deem it untrue
- Often we dismiss feedback because it triggers us
- Take in feedback by seeking to understand it



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