



The Look & Sound of Leadership™

SINCE 1990

Executive Coaching Tips

6+
MILLION
PODCASTS
DOWNLOADED



UNDERSTANDING FEEDBACK

TOM HENSCHHEL
APRIL 2021

This month's coaching conversation explores ways to make feedback more palatable. The secret: sort the feedback you receive into three distinct categories.

[LISTEN](#)

[DOWNLOAD MP3](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

In the lion's mouth

Martin had gotten "homework" from me at the end of our first coaching conversation. I'd asked him to seek out some feedback about himself. I was interested whether, when he heard it, he could be curious about it. What did he tell himself about it? Could he report it to me accurately at our second session?

When Martin's company first called me, he was described to me as disruptive and perhaps uncoachable. I suggested allowing me three conversations with him, after which I'd have a pretty strong guess about his coachability. Now, going into our second conversation, I was curious what stories he might bring back.

We had barely finished greeting each other when he told me he'd done his homework. "And guess who I asked?"

"Who?" I replied.

"Maribel!"

I raised my eyebrows. "Well, good for you! Head in the lion's mouth!" Earlier in the year, Maribel had filed a complaint against Martin. I asked, "So what did she tell you?"



“At first she didn’t say much,” he said. “She kind of dodged it, saying I’d heard everything in the meeting that she had to say to me. I was just honest with her. I told her I actually didn’t hear much of anything in that meeting and that I really would like to hear what she had to say.”

My eyebrows went up once more. “Seriously, Martin? You were able to articulate that?”

“It was true, so, yeah, I just told her the truth.”

“And she didn’t respond?”

“Not that day, no. But she came into my office the next day and said she’d been thinking. She never sat down, by the way. She stayed standing the whole time. She told me she didn’t like me telling her what to do. That I’m not her boss.”

He went on, saying, “She’s right. I’m not her boss. But if I see her making a mistake, what am I supposed to do? Fill out a form? A mistake could cause contamination. It could cost a whole day’s work. How can I not step in?”

“What did she say to that?” I asked.

“Oh, I didn’t say that to her! Well, I probably did in that first meeting. I’m just telling you why I ever said anything to her in the first place. I was only trying to protect the work.”

I nodded, then asked, “Was that all Maribel had to say?”

“She told me, standing there, she doesn’t mind learning but she doesn’t like being called names.”

Name calling

“Being called names? What did she mean?” I asked.

“Stupid. She said that’s how I make her feel. I never actually said she was stupid. And I wouldn’t. She’s not. Stupid, that is. But she thinks I don’t respect her.

“She told me something else, too,” he went on. “She told me she thinks I’m the smartest guy in the department,



but she wouldn't come to me for help. If she needed help she'd probably go to Emeka. Just because he's nicer."

"Wow, Martin, that's a lot to hear," I said.

"She wasn't mean or anything. She was just trying to explain."

I nodded. "So how are you, hearing all that?"



"Well, she's probably right. I've heard that before. I make people feel stupid. Is that something you and I could work on?"

"Sure, Martin. Happy to."

"Okay. We will. But first," he said, "would you answer a question for me?"

"If I can," I said.

"Wait. Even before that, I did pretty good, didn't I? With my homework?"

"You did, Martin. And thanks for asking for my feedback. Yes, I think you did great. You know something I suspect? I suspect you're reporting to me pretty accurately. And that's hard to do. It means you had to be really listening when it was happening, in real time. Listening to feedback is hard *any* time! So bravo to you."

"I wasn't even thinking about the 'reporting accurately' part. I was thinking about the 'be curious' part. I think the reason she came back that second day was because she could tell I wasn't trying to pick a fight with her. I was really just curious. Like you told me to be."

"Great, Martin. I'm glad you could."

"Me, too. Now can I ask my real question?"

"Sure."



Who is name calling who?

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot and I don’t know the answer. You remember when I told you Maribel said if she needed help she’d go to Emeka because he’s nicer? Isn’t that her name calling me? And if it is, is it still feedback?”

“Look,” he continued, “Maribel’s right. Emeka’s way nicer than me. Fine. But, y’know, Maribel accuses me of name calling her because I make her feel stupid. Which I never said. Then she turns around and tells me I’m not very nice. Isn’t that her name calling me?”

“What an interesting question! Where are you in your thinking?”

“Yes, it *is* name calling. Telling me I’m not nice is name calling. Which would make it not feedback. But at the same time, it’s true, I do make people feel stupid, although I don’t mean to. So maybe it *is* feedback.”

“Interesting,” I said. Then, “I have a way of thinking about feedback that may help answer your question. Can I explain it?”

“Okay,” he said.

“It starts with this idea. Every piece of feedback is not the same. Feedback comes in three different flavors. Knowing which you’re hearing can help you make sense of it.”

“Are you saying I’ll be able to fit Maribel’s feedback into one of these three buckets?”

“I don’t know. You tell me. So, can I tell you the three kinds?”

“Go ahead,” he said.

I flicked up one finger at a time. “Appreciation. Evaluation. Coaching. Let me give a quick sketch of each.”





Appreciation

Holding up my first finger, I said, “Appreciation matters. Some people think it doesn’t, but study after study shows how much it does. Especially in the workplace. Appreciation is appreciated. And, by the way, something generic like, ‘Good job!’ does not count as appreciation. Appreciation has to be specific. It has to be about that person. When people get appreciated, they feel seen. *That* is meaningful feedback!”

“What about what Maribel told me? Her message basically was, ‘You made me feel stupid and I would appreciate it if you didn’t do it again.’ Does that count as ‘Appreciation’ but in reverse?”



“No, appreciation is always positive. Different people value different kinds of appreciation, but it’s always positive.”

“What do you mean, different kinds?”

I gave a little shrug. “Some people really value public recognition. Other people feel appreciation through a paycheck or a title. Other people feel appreciation through relationships. Not everyone’s appreciation channel is tuned to the same frequency.”

“Like *‘The 5 Love Languages,’*” he said.

“Exactly. Just like that,” I said.

“So, what’s bucket two?”

Evaluation

“Evaluation,” I said. “This is ranking. Your standing. Where are you in the pack? I think we all want to know where we stand. I also think people can have a skewed understanding of their place in the pack. It can really set back someone back in their career.”

“Braggarts and bullies. Pushing their way to the front whether they deserve to be there or not. I knew kids like that. Some grownups, too!”



I laughed. “I was thinking the opposite! A lot of people who have trouble speaking up imagine themselves way further back in the pack than they actually are. Good evaluative feedback can make a world of difference for people like that.”

“What about an annual review?” he asked. “It tells you where you are in the pack. You meet expectations or exceed expectations. That’s evaluation, right?”

“Exactly. Which brings us to number three. Coaching.”

“Right up your alley,” he said.

Coaching

I laughed. “I often say that as a coach I swim in a sea of feedback. So, yes, I live in this coaching bucket a lot of the time.”

“You know, when they told me I was getting a coach, I thought it was going to be like punishment. Coaching did not sound positive to me.”

“What’s it been like so far?” I asked.

“No, this is good! I’m learning a lot.”

“Well, thank you for the feedback, Martin. I appreciate your appreciation. But let’s stay in this third bucket, the coaching bucket, for a minute. Think about talking to Maribel about contamination. For the moment, let’s forget how it sounded. I think you intended your feedback to be ‘coaching.’ You were trying to improve her performance, right? Giving someone feedback to improve their performance fits in the coaching bucket.”

“Like when I do soccer drills with my daughter. Coaching!”

“Right!” I said. “There’s one other kind of coaching feedback, too. It’s still coaching feedback, but it’s not about performance. It’s about the relationship. It’s about feelings. Suppose you and I are friends. Suppose we meet for dinner six or seven times a year. And pretty much every time we have a date, you’re late or you cancel at the





last minute. When it gets important enough to me, I'm going to ask you to change. That will be coaching feedback. Asking someone to change their behavior for the sake of the relationship is different from soccer drills, but it's still coaching feedback."

"Then what Maribel said to me – about making her feel stupid – was coaching feedback. She wants me to do it differently. She doesn't like feeling that way."

"I agree, Martin. That part of her feedback was coaching. 'Please talk differently to me.' I wonder, if that's true, does it shift your question about name calling?"

"Huh! Yes, if I think of it like her coaching me, it doesn't feel like name calling anymore."

"And what about the part about you and Emeka and being nice? Would you say that was coaching, too, or one of the other two?"

"No, I think it's coaching. She's asking me to be nicer. She wants me to do something differently. That's coaching feedback, right?"

"Right! I see why you think so. *And* I think she's also comparing you to another member of the pack. She's telling you where stand in relation to Emeka. That's evaluation. When it comes to 'niceness,' Emeka is in front of you. But when it comes to smartness, you're in front of Emeka and everyone else. I think part of Maribel's feedback was evaluation and part of it was coaching."

"That's helpful," he said. "It doesn't feel so personal."

"I'm glad," I said. "Martin, I want to point you to a book I think you'll like. It'll help you be a great receiver of feedback. You're going to love the title. It's, *'Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well – even when it is off base, unfair, poorly delivered and, frankly, you're not in the mood.'*"

He laughed. "Sounds like my kind of book!"

"Two people from the Harvard Negotiation Project wrote it. It's a fun read and a fabulous resource."



He flopped his palms on his desk, saying, “So, if I’m going to take her coaching seriously, I’m going to have to stop making people feel stupid. You said you can help with that.”

“I’d love to try,” I said.

That conversation with Martin, exploring what behaviors cause people to shut down to your message, is next month’s episode of [The Look & Sound of Leadership](#).

FOR COMMENTARY & BONUS MATERIAL LISTEN TO THE PODCAST



Core Concepts:

When receiving feedback, listen for three types of feedback:

- **Appreciation:** positive, specific information about things you do well
- **Evaluation:** assessments of where you stand against standards or others
- **Coaching:** requests for change in your performance or the relationship



Related Archive Categories:

[Feedback](#)

[Leadership](#)

[Managing Yourself](#)

Related Episodes:

[Getting Good Feedback](#)

[Handling Feedback Effectively](#)

[Perception is Reality](#)

[Soliciting Feedback](#)

[Unblocking Feedback](#)

CONNECT



CONTRIBUTE

an idea for
future Executive
Coaching Tips



SUBSCRIBE

to the Podcast



LISTEN

to episodes of
"The Look & Sound of
Leadership" podcast



VIEW

searchable archive
of Executive
Coaching Tips



CONTACT

the Essential
Communications
team

818 788 5357

essentialcomm.com

info@essentialcomm.com



6+

**MILLION
PODCASTS
DOWNLOADED**

