



How Well Do You Receive Feedback?

WHILE THE FOCUS TRADITIONALLY IS PUT ON HOW TO GIVE
FEEDBACK, HOW YOU RECEIVE IT IS EQUALLY AS IMPORTANT

By Craig Dowden, Ph.D.

Douglas Stone is the best-selling author of the widely recognized and respected book, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. He is also a lecturer at Harvard Law School and consults around the world to leading organizations including Fidelity, Honda, HP, Merck, Shell and Time Warner, on topics such as negotiation and mediation.

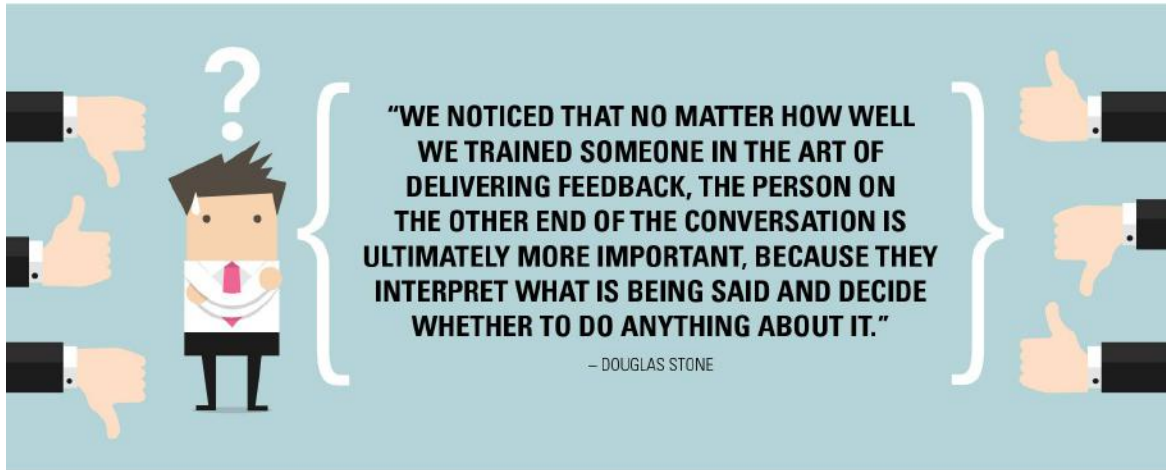
He has spent 22 years with the Harvard Negotiation Project, where he has worked on advanced negotiation applications and the development of negotiation theory. His latest book, *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, was co-authored with his colleague, Sheila Heen.

HR Professional recently spoke with Stone about the book's most important lessons for readers.

What prompted you to write a book on receiving rather than giving feedback?

Douglas Stone: We have worked with a lot of organizations since the publication of *Difficult Conversations* in 1999. When we ask people about their most difficult conversations, giving and receiving feedback is always at the top of the list. However, when we looked at the books available, almost all of them focused on how to give feedback effectively.

While this is undoubtedly an important skill, we noticed that no matter how well we trained someone in the art of delivering feedback, the person on the other end of the conversation is ultimately more important, because they interpret what is being said and decide whether to do anything about it. We decided to write *Thanks for the Feedback* to address that gap in the literature.



In the book, you mention that just because a person receives feedback does not mean they have to act on it. That may surprise some readers.

DS: I'm glad you are mentioning that. When we originally told people we were writing this book, they assumed we were going to argue they had to do something with the feedback they received. That isn't the case at all. We wrote this book from the perspective of the receiver and our primary goal was to share the things that might be interfering with their ability to hear and understand feedback. However, like other things in our lives, we should examine feedback with a thoughtful eye before we decide whether we should act on it.

Another thing we wanted to highlight is that feedback can be quite disruptive to a relationship. Once again, being on the side of the receiver, we wanted to make sure people speak up loudly and clearly when someone is delivering feedback in a destructive way.

One of the big ideas we try to get across is that when we are faced with destructive feedback, we can and should ask the person what their intended goal in sharing is. What are they hoping to have happen? Usually, when people are asked this question, they will say they are trying to help the receiver *improve or get better*. If their delivery style or timing is interfering with their desired impact, this can be a great opportunity to let the deliverer know about that disconnect. You are putting it in terms of their interests, goals and purpose and letting them know their approach is compromising their desired effect.

You talk about the triggers that block feedback. What are they and how do they interfere with our receptivity?

DS: There are a million reasons feedback is hard to hear, but we've grouped all those reasons into three buckets. First, there are "truth triggers," which cause us to reject or struggle with the

feedback because of the feedback itself. For example, we feel it's untrue, unfair or outdated.

The second trigger concerns our relationship with the person delivering the feedback. Essentially, this boils down to what we think about the person and what we believe they think about us. Do they like or care about us? For example, if we think they don't like us or are competing against us, we are much less likely to trust the feedback.

"Identity triggers" are the last reason we struggle with receiving feedback because it challenges our sense of who we are and where we see ourselves in the world. Even if the feedback feels on target, prompting an identity trigger makes it very difficult to accept.

It is important to know that the triggers all interact with one another and that people have different triggers, which is why feedback conversations are so tricky.

How can people best identify and manage their triggers?

DS: In terms of identifying our triggers, become familiar with what goes through your head when you receive feedback. This will help you figure out which of the three triggers you tend to default to, which may be operating at any given moment. And remember, they can all operate at the same time.

When it comes to managing our triggers, there are a few simple things we can do. For example, when we are interpreting feedback through a truth trigger, we tend to ask ourselves the question of "What's wrong with this feedback?" Although it is okay to think about what is potentially wrong, we also need to ask an accompanying question, such as "What is right about this feedback?" or "What could be useful about this feedback?"

It is also important to discuss with feedback givers how we tend to react to feedback and what helps us take it in and understand it. This maximizes the chances we will be able to engage well in a feedback conversation, and, ultimately, learn and grow. ■