

**Receiving Feedback**

# **Why Asking for Advice Is More Effective Than Asking for Feedback**

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**Summary.** Conventional wisdom says you should ask your colleagues for feedback. However, research suggests that feedback often has no (or even a negative) impact on our performance. This is because the feedback we receive is often too vague — it fails to highlight what... [more](#)

You just gave a great first pitch to a major client and landed an invitation to pitch to their senior leaders. Now you want a second opinion on your presentation to see if there's anything you can

improve. What do you do?

Conventional wisdom says you should ask your colleagues for feedback. However, research suggests that feedback often has no (or even a negative) impact on our performance. This is because the feedback we receive is often too vague — it fails to highlight what we can improve on or how to improve.

Our latest research suggests a better approach. Across four experiments — including a field experiment conducted in an executive education classroom — we found that people received more effective input when they asked for *advice* rather than feedback.

In one study, we asked 200 people to offer input on a job application letter for a tutoring position, written by one of their peers. Some people were asked to provide this input in the form of “feedback,” while others were asked to provide “advice.” Those who provided feedback tended to give vague, generally praising comments. For example, one reviewer who was asked to give feedback made the following comment: “This person seems to meet quite a few of the requirements. They have experience with kids, and the proper skills to teach someone else. Overall, they seem like a reasonable applicant.”

However, when asked to give advice on the same application letter, people offered more critical and actionable input. One reviewer noted more specific action items: “I would add in your previous experience tutoring or similar interactions with children. Describe your tutoring style and why you chose it. Add what your ultimate end goal would be for an average 7 year old.”

In fact, compared to those asked to give feedback, those asked to provide “advice” suggested 34% more areas of improvement and 56% more ways to improve.

In another study, we asked 194 full-time employees in the U.S. to describe a colleague's performance on a recent work task. These tasks ranged from "putting labels on items" to "creating new marketing strategies." Then, we asked employees to give feedback or advice on the work performance they just described. Once again, those who were asked to provide feedback gave less critical and actionable input (e.g. one wrote, "They gave a very good performance without any complaints related to his work") than those asked to provide advice (e.g. one wrote, "In the future, I suggest checking in with our executive officers more frequently. During the event, please walk around, and be present to make sure people see you").

We further replicated these findings in a field experiment using instructor evaluations. In an end-of-course evaluation, we asked 70+ executive education students from around the world to provide either feedback or advice to their instructors. Again, advice more frequently contained detailed explanations of what worked and what didn't, such as: "I loved the cases. But I would have preferred concentrating more time on learning specific tools that would help improve the negotiation skills of the participants." Feedback, in contrast, often included generalities, such as "This faculty's content and style of teaching was very good."

Why is asking for advice more effective than asking for feedback? As it turns out, feedback is often associated with evaluation. At school, we receive feedback with letter grades. When we enter the workforce, we receive feedback with our performance evaluations. Because of this link between feedback and evaluation, when people are asked to provide feedback, they often focus on judging others' performance; they think more about how others performed in the past. This makes it harder to imagine someone's future and possibly better performance. As a result, feedback givers end up providing less critical and actionable input.

In contrast, when asked to provide advice, people focus less on evaluation and more on possible future actions. Whereas the past is unchangeable, the future is full of possibilities. So, if you ask someone for advice, they will be more likely to think forward to future opportunities to improve rather than backwards to the things you have done, which you can no longer change.

To document this effect, we ran another study that was very similar to our first. In this experiment, we again asked hundreds of people to provide feedback or advice on a peer's job application. But this time, we also asked feedback providers to shift their focus toward "developing the writer." When removed from an evaluation mindset, by focusing more on developing the recipient, feedback providers were just as critical and actionable in their input as advice providers.

Is asking for feedback always a worse strategy than asking for advice? Not necessarily.

Sometimes soliciting feedback may be more beneficial. People who are novices in their field typically find critical and specific input less motivating — in part because they don't feel like they have the basic skills necessary to improve. So for novices, it might be better to ask for feedback, rather than advice, to receive less demotivating criticism and more high-level encouragement.

Organizations are full of opportunities to learn from peers, colleagues, and clients. Despite its prevalence, asking for feedback is often an ineffective strategy for promoting growth and learning. Our work suggests this is because when givers focus too much on evaluating past actions, they fail to provide tangible recommendations for future ones. How can we overcome this barrier? By asking our peers, clients, colleagues, and bosses for *advice* instead.

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