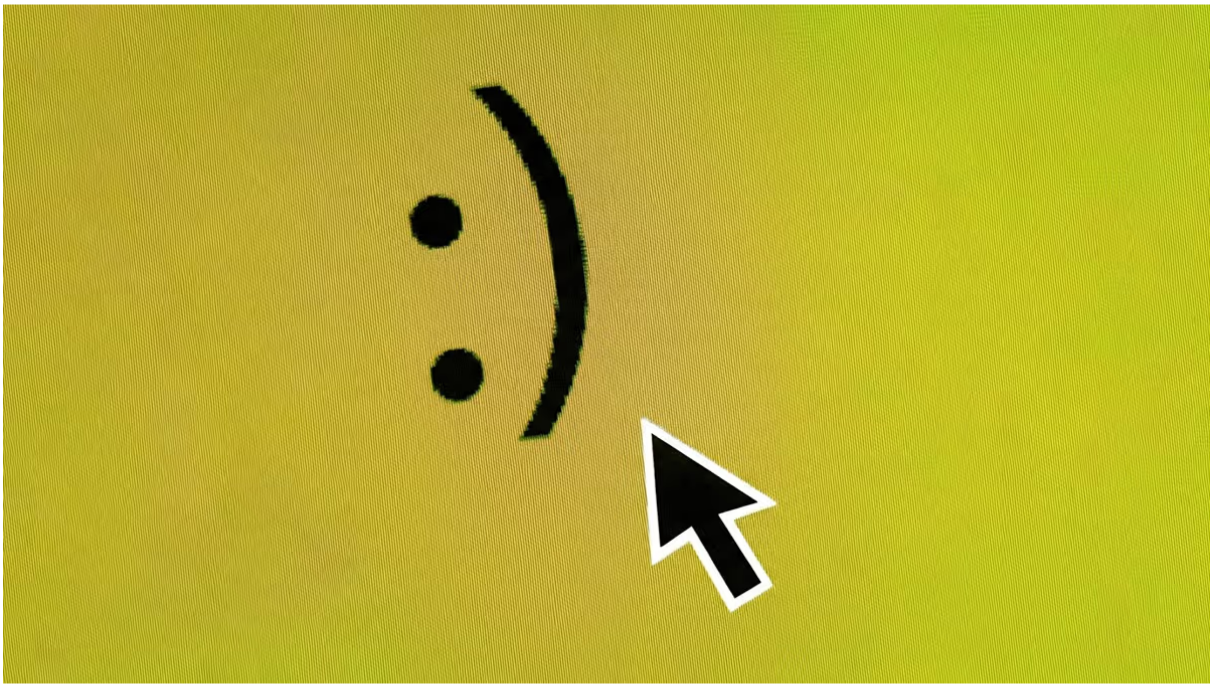
HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

Giving Feedback

Great Leaders Know Which Emotions Their Feedback Will Trigger

by Bin Zhao, Fernando Olivera and Amy C. Edmondson

July 13, 2026



Steven Puetzer/Getty Images

Summary. People don't learn from feedback simply because they receive it—they learn when the emotions feedback triggers keep their attention focused on improving the work rather than protecting themselves. Drawing on more than a decade of research, the authors explain which emotions promote learning, which inhibit it, and why even well-intentioned feedback often backfires. They conclude with six practical techniques leaders can use to create feedback that motivates improvement instead of defensiveness. **close**

At a weekly product review meeting, a newly promoted vice president addresses a missed deadline. Her conclusion: The analysis was rushed, key assumptions weren't tested, and the final recommendation didn't hold up under scrutiny. After the meeting, the VP meets separately with two members of her team who worked on the project. To both, she delivers the same message: the work fell short, and the approach needs to change.

One employee leans in. She asks where her reasoning broke down, revisits the data, and returns a few days later with a clearer, more robust analysis. The other pulls back. In the following weeks, he becomes quieter in meetings, avoids taking the lead on similar work, and grows noticeably defensive when his ideas are questioned.

Same feedback. Same manager. Different outcomes.

Most executives would explain this difference in terms of personality: some people are more resilient, learning-oriented, or coachable than others. But our research suggests that this explanation overlooks something more immediate and, crucially, more actionable: *the emotional reaction the feedback creates*.

Feedback Doesn't Drive Learning. Emotions Do.

Senior leaders and the managers they develop are trained to deliver feedback that is clear, specific, and constructive. Yet even well-delivered input often fails to produce learning.

Across more than a decade of research on learning from errors, we have found a consistent pattern: people do not learn from errors simply because they receive feedback. Whether mistakes become learning opportunities depends largely on the emotional response they trigger, which determines whether people learn or shut down.

In the moment they receive feedback, people are not just processing information; they are interpreting what it means. Often implicitly, they are asking:

- *Did I do something wrong?*
- *Could I have done better?*
- *How does this reflect on me, and who else is affected?*
- *Was it serious enough to worry about?*

The answers shape their emotional reaction and where their attention goes next. If attention stays on the task, people analyze, adjust, and improve. If it shifts to themselves, they defend, withdraw, or disengage.

In that sense, feedback works indirectly: it influences how people feel; those feelings shape their motivation, and that motivation determines whether learning happens at all.

Not All Emotions Are Equal

Leaders often try to minimize negative emotions in feedback conversations. But this misses a critical point: not all negative emotions are harmful. Some sharpen attention and motivate improvement. Others redirect attention away from the task entirely. What matters is not whether feedback feels good or bad, but where the emotion directs attention.

Self-Focused Emotions: When Attention Turns Inward

Some emotions turn attention inward, toward what feedback seems to say about the individual.

Shame—*"I'm not good enough"*—is the most damaging. For example, when a leader says, *"You're just not strategic enough,"* the message can feel like a judgment about the person rather than the work. Instead of thinking about how to improve the analysis, the employee is more likely to question their ability—or disengage altogether. Without coaching or a path to improve, that doubt can harden into *"I'm just not cut out for this type of work,"* leading people to withdraw, hide mistakes, or become defensive.

Fear can have a similar effect when feedback feels threatening or signals more risk than opportunity to learn. If people anticipate negative consequences (e.g., *"Is my promotion at risk?"* or *"Could I lose my job over this?"*), they focus less on improving and more on avoiding exposure.

In both cases, attention shifts from the work to protecting oneself. Learning stalls. This is why even accurate feedback can backfire: when it is framed in ways that feel personally threatening, it redirects attention away from improvement and toward self-protection.

Task-Focused Emotions: When Attention Stays on the Work

Other emotions keep attention anchored in the task.

Guilt arises when people believe they made a specific mistake: *"I did something wrong"* that had a negative effect on someone else. Because it is tied to a concrete action or decision, guilt can motivate accountability, repair, and correction. People who feel guilty are motivated to make amends and often to do better next time.

Regret, by contrast, emerges when people recognize that a better choice was available: *"I could have done better."* This realization naturally prompts comparison, reflection, and adjustment.

Frustration signals that something is blocking progress. When channeled effectively, it can fuel focused action and sustained effort.

These emotions differ, but they share a critical feature: they keep attention on what can be changed. The senior leader's role—and the role of every manager they develop—is to reinforce this focus by anchoring feedback in specific actions, decisions, and alternatives, rather than broad judgments.

Other-Directed Emotions: When Attention Shifts to Others

Feedback does not only trigger self-focused reactions. It can also generate emotions directed toward others.

Anger arises when people attribute the problem externally: *"This isn't my fault."* They may think, *"You didn't communicate the deadline or clarify expectations,"* or *"I was put on a team that couldn't deliver."* When feedback is perceived as unfair or misinformed, attention shifts to defending one's position or assigning blame. Learning becomes secondary.

Gratitude, by contrast, can emerge when feedback is experienced as supportive and developmental. When people believe the feedback is intended to help them improve, they are more likely to engage with it constructively.

These other-directed emotions shape whether feedback becomes a collaborative learning process or a contested evaluation. Leaders influence this directly. When feedback feels one-sided or inaccurate, it invites defensiveness and blame. When it invites dialogue—by asking for the employee's perspective and acknowledging uncertainty—it is far more likely to generate engagement rather than resistance.

Forward-Looking Emotions: What Sustains Learning

Learning from feedback doesn't end with understanding what went wrong. It depends on whether people stay motivated to improve.

This is where forward-looking emotions matter.

Hope emerges when people believe improvement is possible. After receiving critical feedback, employees are more likely to act on it when they can see a clear path forward: what to change, how to improve, and what success would look like.

Leaders play a key role in shaping this perception. Vague encouragement (*"You'll get there."*) does little to build hope. What works is clarity: identifying specific next steps, breaking down complex changes, and showing how improvement is achievable.

Pride, when tied to effort and progress, reinforces that learning is worthwhile. If feedback only highlights what is wrong, employees may understand the message but lack motivation to continue. When leaders also recognize progress—what has improved, what was done well, what is moving in the right direction—they signal that effort leads to results.

Together, hope and pride sustain learning beyond the initial feedback moment. They keep attention not just on what needs to change, but on the possibility and value of improving it.

Why Good Feedback Still Fails

This emotional lens helps explain why even thoughtful, well-intentioned feedback often falls short. Our research identifies three common reasons:

Leaders focus on clarity, not emotional impact.

Clear feedback is important, but it does not determine how the message is received. Two people can hear the same words and experience entirely different emotions. One may feel regret or motivation to improve; the other may feel shame, fear, or defensiveness. Senior leaders often assume that if a message is logical and well-structured, it will land as intended. Yet what people hear is shaped as much by emotion as by the message itself.

Feedback unintentionally triggers the wrong emotion.

A statement intended to guide improvement can easily be interpreted as a personal judgment or an unfair evaluation. When that happens, attention shifts away from learning, either inward (defensiveness) or outward (blame).

Systems shape emotional responses.

Even the best feedback cannot overcome a context that signals risk. When mistakes carry high costs—to careers, compensation, or reputations—fear dominates and learning gives way to self-protection. As pointed in our work, senior leaders set that context. The norms, incentives, and consequences that govern how errors are treated are largely a product of decisions made at the top.

6 Things Effective Leaders Do Differently

Leaders who consistently help others learn from feedback do something different: they pay attention to the emotional response, and they train the managers below them to do the same. Here are six specific techniques they learn to do well:

Activate guilt and regret without triggering shame.

Effective feedback helps people recognize both what they did wrong and what they could have done better. This activates guilt (*"I made a mistake in my planning."*) and regret (*"I could have chosen differently."*) while avoiding signals that something is wrong with them, rather than with what they did. The goal is to focus attention on specific actions and decisions and their impact, not on what it says about them as a person. Coach the managers in your organization to do the same: make "stay on the behavior, not the person" a shared standard.

Reduce defensiveness by addressing fairness.

If feedback risks being perceived as inaccurate or unfair, address that directly. Invite the employee's perspective and be open to discussion. This reduces defensiveness and anger, keeping the conversation focused on understanding and improvement rather than blame. Model this behavior in your own feedback conversations. When senior leaders are seen inviting pushback and remaining open-minded, it normalizes that behavior for every manager in the organization.

Channel frustration into progress.

Make sure all leaders with feedback-giving responsibility help people identify what is blocking progress and what to do next to improve their ability. Frustration becomes productive when it is paired with a clear path forward. Breaking problems into manageable steps keeps attention on solving the issue rather than feeling stuck.

Build hope and pride and reinforce progress.

Leaders and managers at all levels should learn to make improvement visible and acknowledge it. Instead of stopping at what went wrong, clarify what better looks like and how to get there. Break changes into manageable steps so employees leave with a clear path forward. Just as importantly, recognize progress. When effort leads to visible improvement, it builds confidence and reinforces that learning is both possible and worthwhile.

Pay attention to the emotional reactions that managers trigger.

The emotional quality of feedback across an organization is largely shaped by frontline and middle managers. Make emotionally intelligent feedback a core management skill, and evaluate managers not only by results but also by the climate they create. Ask: Do people speak up after receiving feedback, or do they go quiet? Do team members surface mistakes early, or do problems emerge only after they have grown? These behaviors are often a better indicator of management effectiveness than what happens in the feedback conversation itself.

Use this simple check.

After giving feedback, most leaders ask, *“Was I clear?”* A more useful question is: *“Where did their attention go, and what emotion got them there?”* Are they focused on improving the work or on protecting themselves or questioning others? The answer reveals whether the feedback is likely to lead to learning.

Ask the same of the managers you develop: not just *“Did you deliver the feedback?”* but *“Where did their attention go afterward?”* That question, asked consistently, begins to shift the feedback culture of an entire organization.

***

Feedback is not just information. It is an emotional event, and those emotions determine whether people focus on improving their work, protecting themselves, or questioning others.

Leaders who understand what employees are feeling can use that awareness as a compass. They can recognize when emotions such as guilt or frustration keep attention productively on the work—and when shame or fear shut down learning and require a different approach. That awareness separates feedback that motivates from feedback that merely stings.

The best leaders don't just give better feedback themselves. They build organizations where emotionally intelligent feedback becomes the norm, fostering emotions that support learning and improvement while minimizing those that undermine both. That is not just a personal skill. It is an organizational one—and it starts with you.

Bin Zhao , a professor of Management and Organization Studies at the Beedie School of Business, Simon Fraser University (Canada), is a leading researcher on learning from errors and negative performance feedback. She has over a decade of experience teaching and consulting on performance management.

Fernando Olivera is an associate professor in organizational behavior at the Ivey Business School in London, Ontario, Canada. His research explores how individuals and teams learn from experience and failure, with a particular focus on leadership development and decision-making in complex environments.

Amy C. Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School and the author of *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well*. She is an expert on team learning and psychological safety.

Read more on **Giving feedback** or related topics **Feedback**, **Employee performance management**, **Developing employees**, **Talent management**, **Managing people** and **Mentoring**