



Exercise: Interpreting Negative Feedback Accurately

Receiving negative feedback from anyone (a manager, a worker, a partner, a friend) is difficult for most of us, even in the best of times. This is understandable when we recognize that we all have core needs to perform well in the various roles we play, and to be liked and admired by others. Nevertheless, receiving negative feedback is unavoidable, especially in the workplace, and is important for helping you improve your performance. As such, we can all benefit from being more receptive to it. This begins with interpreting negative feedback accurately by focusing on its constructive intent and keeping it in perspective.

One of the main reasons that negative feedback often feels bad is that we tend to make assumptions about what the other person is saying. It can be very helpful to train yourself to focus *specifically* and *only* on the words being said, without making assumptions about any possible hidden messages we think someone may be trying to convey. For example, if your boss says something like “*the quality of your last report was lower than what I am used to seeing from you*”, it can be tempting to interpret this as “*I am terrible at what I do*”, “*she is disappointed in me*”, or “*I’m a failure*”. Unfortunately, the assumptions we make tend to be overly negative, even catastrophic, and frequently inaccurate. We can easily take a comment on one slightly flawed report and blow it out of proportion into a comment on our overall ineffectiveness.



Think of some negative feedback you have received in the workplace. Identify what was said and take note of any assumptions you made. Then rewrite those assumptions to more accurately reflect the actual situation. Examples appear in italics.

Negative feedback I received (be specific)	From whom (describe situation)	Assumptions I made	A more accurate interpretation may be
<i>Workers say they don't feel a real connection with me.</i>	<i>From the regional manager during our one-on-one.</i>	<i>The workers don't like me, and the regional manager thinks I don't care about them.</i>	<i>The workers like me and would feel even more appreciated if I took more time to connect with them, and the regional manager knows I have good people skills and wants to make sure I put them to good use.</i>

The next time you receive negative feedback, be aware of the assumptions you make. Try to actively catch the assumptions and reword them to more accurately reflect what is being said.