

Who tells YOU when you are being a JERK?

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This week, while I was listening to one of my favorite podcasts, [Armchair Expert](#), their guest shared a story about how someone had told him that he was being a jerk. In this case, he had earned it and was grateful for that reality check.

In fact, on the podcast, this led to a discussion about how valuable it is to have someone tell you when you are being a jerk. We all have those moments. And we could all use some help fixing our behavior when it happens.

I know I have.

One time in particular from early in my career stands out in my mind. As a young business owner still trying to figure out how to be a leader for my people, I made a lot of mistakes. I'll never forget the morning when one of my people walked into my office, sat down across from me, looked me square in the eye and said, "You're being a real jerk lately."

She actually used a more colorful word than this, but the message struck me like an arrow in the chest. It was a big wake-up call. Thankfully, my instinct that day was to ask questions. As a result, I learned a lot that made me a much better leader in the future.

Being told that you are being a jerk doesn't feel very good in the moment, but it's really helpful feedback, and I'm always grateful for it in hindsight (sadly, I can speak with significant experience about this topic).

Most of us don't intend to be jerks to other people. But we are human, and we are far from perfect. We get tired, impatient, irritable, distracted, and self-righteous, which sometimes can manifest in treating others poorly.

We need to be called out for being a jerk when it's deserved. It's super valuable.

In fact, having people around you who will tell you when you aren't being the version of yourself, they know you want to be is invaluable—particularly as a leader. It's also pretty rare.

Why Critical Feedback is Difficult

If getting this kind of feedback is so valuable and important, why is it so challenging? Even when we are open to this kind of feedback and we want it, it's not easy to find.

Most of our struggles with feedback are due to human nature.

There's a body of recent neuroscience research that shows that our brain responds in the same way to feedback that negatively compares us to others as it does to physical pain. This is particularly true when we feel the feedback is unfair or unjust.

Critical feedback actually hurts. As with any kind of pain, we tend to try to avoid it. And, to make matters worse, we tend to have an inflated view of ourselves. The Dunning-Kruger Effect explains how we have a cognitive bias to overestimate our knowledge and ability.

So nearly any feedback we receive is likely to make us feel negatively compared to others, invoking a pain-like response. Particularly at work, critical feedback can feel very threatening, so it triggers our fight or flight response. We get defensive. We push back. We argue. We deny.

The person trying to help us by providing this feedback gets punished for attempting to help us. They only make that mistake once. No more feedback for you.

How to Get the Feedback You Need

Feedback fuels learning. If you want to become better at anything, you need feedback. If you are a manager or leader of people, then it is a requirement.

If you hope to have people around you who will tell you when you are being a jerk (or in any other way not living up to your expectations), then you have to make it safe to do so. There are some important ways you can make this happen.

1. Build relationships and trust first.

My wife gives me feedback all the time. Sometimes, she tells me when I'm being a jerk. However, when she gives me that feedback, it doesn't feel threatening because of the strength of our relationship. I implicitly trust her intention in giving me that feedback is only because she cares for what's best for me.

It doesn't feel threatening because of the strength and trust in our relationship. This means no pain and no defensive response (at least not much of one...I'm still human).

If you want the people around you to feel comfortable telling you when you are being a jerk or doing something else that doesn't align with who you are, start with strengthening the relationship. Particularly as a manager or leader at work, until you've established really solid trust with your people, it will be really difficult for them to give you the kind of feedback you need.

In my story above, the reason this employee felt comfortable telling me I was a jerk, and I was able to respond by asking questions is that we'd worked together for years and had a strong relationship. Our trust made it safe for her to tell me what I needed to hear and for me to hear it.

2. Invite the feedback.

In the story on the podcast, the person who had been told he was a jerk was out asking people for insights and feedback about a particular situation. He had invited the feedback, so when it came, he welcomed it.

This is another tactic you can use that has roots in psychology research. When we request feedback, we are less likely to react defensively to it.

The act of requesting it makes the feedback feel less threatening when it's shared. Plus, we are able to prepare ourselves psychologically to receive and respond, even when it's critical or negative.

This may seem obvious, but if you ask for more feedback, you are likely to receive more. But don't just do it once, make it a habit.

3. Learn these two phrases: "Thank you" and "Tell me more."

When people give you the gift of feedback (I know being told "you're being a jerk" doesn't feel like a gift, but it is), don't punish them for their courage and generosity.

There are only two appropriate responses when receiving feedback if you hope to encourage it to happen more in the future: gratitude and curiosity.

I remember hearing the great Marshall Goldsmith speak years ago about feedback. The biggest takeaway I still remember is learning to respond to feedback with "thank you."

Giving feedback can be a pretty daunting task, so when someone musters the courage to provide it to you, be grateful. This is true for all kinds of feedback: positive and critical.

Simply say, "Thank you for the feedback. I really value your opinion." That's all that's needed in many cases.

The other phrase that's helpful to master is, "tell me more."

When someone shares with you that you are being a jerk, it's a good idea to use that moment as a learning experience. "Tell me more" opens the door for them to share the details you need to do better in the future.

More Feedback Leads to More Growth

I've never been one who loves receiving feedback (too sensitive, I suppose), but I've come to understand the vital importance of getting the right feedback at the right moment. It can change the trajectory of your life and career.

Ensuring you get the feedback you need requires real intention on your part. By starting with the tips, I've offered today, you'll be well on your way.

And the side benefit is that as you practice these things, you'll be role modeling for others, showing them the path to fuel their own growth as well.