

# The Best Leaders are Feedback Magnets — Here's How to Become One

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After interviewing dozens of top executives in fireside chats — including Kim Scott of Radical Candor fame — I started to notice a pattern. Even though they were all well-practiced with tons of public speaking experience under their belts, every single one of them asked me for feedback after the event. That's when it hit me: The best leaders are feedback magnets. Getting actionable feedback is a skill, and the top performers have excelled largely because they've never stopped honing it.

This is, unfortunately, something of a well-kept secret. Lots of advice centers around getting better at giving feedback to others, but we rarely focus on how to attract useful feedback about ourselves — even though it's in our own best interest to do so. What's more is we often unintentionally repel the rare feedback that does come our way by getting defensive or shutting down.

Knowing what other people think about you can be life changing. It's the key to getting promoted faster and becoming the kind of leader people are excited to work with. On the flip side, not getting this intel is a silent career killer. You get passed over for new roles or special assignments without ever understanding why, never getting an opportunity to develop and prove you can do better.

Back when I was a Product Lead, the Director of Engineering pointed out to me that while the team was verbally agreeing with my product feature recommendation, they weren't actually supportive of my solution. I was surprised to hear this, as during our team meeting, I truly thought everyone was on board with my idea. But when I dug into the feedback, I realized he was right. My team wasn't bought in because I hadn't shared the thought process behind my recommendation. This was an 'aha' moment for me. I changed my approach — instead of just sharing my conclusion, I first aligned on the problem with them, then shared my recommendation, including the full story behind how I reached it. As I walked through my idea, I proactively sought input from my team. In the end, the whole team felt ownership of the idea, and I was seen as the leader I hoped to be.

That comment from the Engineering Director ended up being life-changing feedback. If I hadn't heard it, I would have continued with my approach, which would have led to problems on projects and friction in the team. Instead, I transformed the way I get buy-in for my ideas. I internalized the idea that influencing stakeholders is an important and learnable skill. Ever since then, every idea I've proposed has been both better received and better executed. I can't overstate the night-and-day difference.

Being a feedback magnet is a game changer in your career trajectory for two reasons:

1. Feedback is the only way to see your blind spots. Everyone has blind spots; what separates the best performers from everyone else is how they manage them.
2. Your colleagues already have feedback for you. They're just not saying it aloud. They've had thoughts like, "Sarah NEEDS to stop saying 'um' so much in meetings," or "Ugh! Here I go again, working with Mike, who's never gotten a deliverable to me on time," or "Once again, I have no idea WTH this person is trying to say." Their unspoken impressions contain precious insights — if only you could get them to communicate those impressions out loud.

Unfortunately, people typically don't volunteer that kind of feedback unless they're forced to put it into a performance review. In fact, they actively avoid giving it because it makes them uncomfortable. They're afraid it'll sound impolite, or that you'll get angry with them, or that they'll lose some kind of social standing with you. They feel awkward. And they're great at making excuses for not speaking up:

- "I'm not the right person to tell them this."
- "I'll have time to tell them later."
- "I already provided enough info for them to recognize the feedback."
- "I've already given them a lot of other feedback, and I don't want to annoy them."
- "I'm not good at giving feedback, and there's too much to lose if I say the wrong thing."

Sounds familiar? To break through this type of fear and discomfort, you have to get proactive. You have to go out of your way to attract feedback.

Below I'll dive into what I see as the two steps to becoming a feedback magnet: First, becoming more receptive by learning how to manage your knee-jerk reactions to feedback, and second, increasing the amount of quality feedback you receive by empowering your colleagues. I'll share examples from my own career, tactical questions for you to try out in conversations, and a helpful template that I use to marshall the feedback I've received into an action plan.

## STEP 1: LEARN HOW TO MANAGE YOUR KNEE-JERK REACTION

When most of us hear, "Can I give you some feedback?" an instinctual "Uh-oh!" feeling kicks in. We tense up and brace for a cutting remark, the kind that validates our worst fears about ourselves: I'm not a strong leader, I'm not strategic, I'm not good enough. In this state of mind, we can't help but exude nervous energy. Other people pick up on that — and consequently clam up.

Feedback magnets have a fundamentally different mindset. They're eager to get it and make sure people know it. They've trained themselves to push aside fears about their egos and respond with

enthusiasm. They don't exude nervous energy because they're genuinely interested in learning more and getting better. We've all seen the difference between leaders who bristle at constructive criticism, and the ones who lean in. In my own career, one of my managers realized that he wasn't great at communicating vision and direction with his team. Instead of pushing back, he embraced the feedback and took the proactive step to work with an executive coach to help him be a better communicator and leader — this was a clear signal to our team.

To become a feedback magnet, you have to train yourself out of the knee-jerk "Uh-oh!" reaction that so many of us feel when someone attempts to give feedback. If you don't keep your cool when receiving the feedback, your colleagues will feel frustrated or even more uncomfortable than they already do. This significantly reduces the chances of them sharing what's on their mind in the future. It also means they'll be less open to listening to your explanation of your behavior, or re-evaluating whether you were truly at fault.

Here are a few ways to practice:

### **Tip #1: Reframe feedback as an opportunity to grow.**

Everyone has limitations. What sets people apart is how they manage them. No matter what it is or whom it comes from, top performers see all feedback as a growth opportunity. Even if they completely disagree with the feedback, and even if they don't have much respect or admiration for the feedback-giver, they can still learn from what that person has to say.

All feedback is good feedback. That doesn't mean you should act on everything others think you should do — but rather that you should give careful thought to every piece of feedback you receive to see if it rings true.

Even unfair feedback usually has at least some truth to it. If you're able to triage it appropriately and respond gracefully, you'll get better faster than people whose egos are fragile. When you receive feedback, get in the habit of asking yourself: "What about this feedback could be true?"

For example, a colleague told me that I behaved "aggressively" in a meeting. That hurt. I was constantly striving to create a welcoming and collaborative environment — I wouldn't dream of making people feel on edge. At the same time, I felt that my colleague's feedback was biased, because my male counterpart exhibited similar behavior, but that same colleague praised his approach. It's a delicate situation to respond to.

Here's how I handled it: First, I thanked him for the feedback and reiterated my intention for us to have a collaborative relationship. I then asked my colleague what aspects of our interaction didn't make him feel good. From that, I learned more specifics on how my actions might be perceived by others. But I also shared with my colleague that I felt his feedback might be biased, giving examples

of the inconsistent pattern that I had observed in a calm way. I do think we were both able to learn from the experience.

## **Tip #2: Assume good intent and follow-up with gratitude.**

Remind yourself that the person giving you the feedback is taking a risk by giving you their honest take. Many people don't receive feedback gracefully. Instead of shooting the messenger, take a moment to appreciate that they're taking a risk on your behalf. They want you to succeed, and they're trying to help you grow.

Thank them in the moment — and most crucially — be sure to follow up to thank them again later. For example, send them a Slack message after the meeting to say “Thank you so much for giving me feedback. This was super valuable and an area that I really want to improve on. I know it's not always easy giving feedback, so I really appreciate it.” This reinforces that you're truly grateful and it'll make them more likely to settle into a habit of giving you feedback regularly.

## **Tip #3: Ask questions to avoid being defensive.**

When I hear tough feedback, my instinct is to jump in by justifying my actions. For example, when my manager once told me I should've done more to ensure the project was delivered on time, I quickly responded that I had scoped everything out, but the marketing team had delivered their part late. This defensive explanation didn't play well. It made my manager question my leadership, and he became more wary of giving me feedback in the future. While my default reaction is defensiveness, yours may be to find an excuse or even just shut down.

But ask yourself: “Do I really want to let that hold me back?” Instead of giving into these fears, you'll learn more by leaning into your inquisitive side and asking questions. In addition to gaining valuable insight into the feedback giver's perspective, asking questions will also help you clarify what they're actually saying.

You can't trust your initial reaction to feedback. Defensive responses are driven by common fears about our own competence, and fear is a powerful distorter of the messages we hear.

When our colleagues say, “This one part of the design isn't solving the customer problem in scope,” we hear it as, “I'm a terrible designer.” When they say, “You need to strategically prioritize which initiatives your team should focus on,” we hear it as, “I'm dropping all the balls. My manager thinks I'm incompetent.”

Asking good questions breaks through fear's distortion field. It enables you to process the message in a more accurate and insightful way. Here are some clarification questions you can ask in the moment to keep fear at bay and get more accurate and valuable information:

What's an example of when you've seen me exhibit this behavior?

To confirm I'm correctly understanding you, is this what you're saying?

- What's an example of what "good" or "killing it" looks like?
- Who do you think is awesome at this?
- What would you expect as a 10% improvement?
- How does this affect your view of my overall performance?
- If you were me, what's the first thing you'd try to change?

Asking these questions buys me time to calm down, helps me get out of my own head and enables me to better understand the feedback.

#### **Tip #4: Reflect on the feedback you've received.**

Resist the urge to push back. Instead, thank the feedback giver and set aside time to reflect on the feedback you've received. Once you're in a clear state of mind, you can decide how to respond and evaluate whether you agree with the feedback. Follow up with the feedback giver to share your reflections.

Even if you disagree, it may be an opportunity to improve how you relate or communicate with someone else.

Ask yourself:

- What part of this feedback is true?
- Have I ever seen someone else making this mistake?
- Where, exactly, do I disagree with this? Can I put my perspective into specific words?

Returning to the example above, after my manager told me I should've done more to ensure the project's timely delivery. I took the time to reflect, and realized that I could've been more in sync with my counterpart in marketing to ensure the project was on track. It was my responsibility to ensure the project was moving forward and to remove any blockers. I shared this reflection with my manager in a 1:1 follow-up. It enabled him to understand my mistake more clearly, but it also helped him see more clearly the things I had done well.

If I had disagreed with my manager's feedback, I still would have reflected and followed up. In that case, I would have explained my point of view (ideally showing documentation to back up my assertions) and why I thought his perspective wasn't fully accurate. That would've been a good opportunity to improve communication between the two of us.

## STEP 2: EMPOWER YOUR COLLEAGUES TO SHARE MORE

Usually when I ask for feedback, I just hear, “You’re doing good” or “There’s nothing I can think of.” That doesn’t tell me how to be better. To help get the unfiltered truth, you need to do more than just invite people to give you feedback; you need to remove any and all friction. The biggest sources of friction include people’s unspoken fears about giving you negative feedback, uncertainty about how to phrase their feedback, and self-consciousness about whether their feedback is useful.

Here are some tips to solicit more feedback that actually helps you improve:

### **Tip #1: Narrow the question.**

Instead of asking vague questions like, "Do you have any feedback for me?" or "How can I improve?" ask specific questions to unearth truly constructive feedback. A narrow question reduces the mental burden for your colleagues to identify how you can improve. It also gives them permission to share candid feedback because they’re telling you about something that you’ve already identified as a potential problem.

The quality of your questions determines the quality of the feedback you receive.

For example, an Engineering Manager at Pinterest and member of Ascend’s Leadership Program, asks her teams: “What’s one thing I can do to support you?” This creates an opening for her team and cross-functional partners to open up and share what they truly need. She gets a ton of insights on specific things to focus on from this one question.

More examples:

- How can I exceed expectations?
- How can this deliverable be 10% better?
- What would make you “love” this instead of just “like” it?
- Was I saying “like” too much in the meeting?
- Did you feel comfortable sharing your opinion in our last meeting even if you disagreed with the group?

Finally, here’s my not-so secret favorite feedback hack: When stakeholders hesitate to give me honest feedback, I ask them to rate my performance or idea on a scale of 0-5. They rarely say “5”. Then I follow up by asking what I could have done differently to make it a 5? This approach is disarming, and reiterates that I’m truly interested in improving which motivates them to start coaching me.

For example, I asked one of my reports to rate how well he felt I had set him up for the task he was working on. When he rated it a “3,” I realized that I wasn’t setting clear expectations. Moving forward, I was more explicit about what successful completion of a task looked like.

### **Tip #2: Swap “feedback” for “advice.”**

“Feedback” is a loaded term. Not only do you tighten up when you ask for “feedback,” so does the feedback giver. Swapping it out for “advice” is more inviting and indicates you value your colleague’s counsel. Instead of saying “Can I have some feedback on what I could have done better?” say “Do you have any advice on how I can improve on X?” You’ll achieve your goal of receiving constructive feedback, but the experience will feel more comfortable for the feedback giver. This strategy works with stakeholders of all levels, though your manager is likely to feel equally as comfortable giving you feedback whether you frame it as “feedback” or “advice.”

### **Tip #3: Get people invested**

Your team wants to help you succeed. Make it easy for them to help you and prove to them that you’ll actually act on their feedback. This is important since most folks typically either don’t follow through on improving the relevant behavior or fail to share the impact of the advice they’ve received.

To differentiate yourself, start by sharing your improvement areas and ask them in advance for feedback as they see you in action. This will help call their attention to it and de-risk their fears around giving you feedback. For example, say to your colleague: “In our next 1:1, I’d love feedback on how well we’ve been collaborating so far,” or “After my All-Hands presentation, can you please give me feedback on my communication skills?”

Next, close the loop by following up with an action plan to show how you’ll apply the feedback they gave you. Here’s a template that visualizes the approach I’ve used in the past:

Verbalizing the actions, you want to take not only helps hold you accountable to actually improving, but also demonstrates that you’re taking people’s feedback seriously.

When you share more specifics around how you’d like to grow and then follow up to close the loop, folks will root for your success more — and celebrate in your wins alongside you.

## **IN SUMMARY:**

To recap: You want to become a feedback magnet because 1) others’ feedback is the only way to see your blind spots, and 2) your team already has potentially life-changing feedback for you, but they’re not telling you because you haven’t asked them.

There are two steps to becoming a feedback magnet, and we discussed specific tips for each step.

When you practice these techniques, your default M.O. is to create a welcoming space for your colleagues to give you candid feedback. You'll get critical insights to help you improve in real-time. As a result, you'll accelerate your career growth and build stronger relationships. You'll reduce the risk of a stressful performance review since you'll have a chance to start improving well in advance.

The best part is that you become the person people want on their teams, since they know you're eager to grow and will always strive to do your best work.