



## Receiving Feedback



# To Become Your Best Self, Study Your Successes

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**Nearly fifteen years ago, in 2005, we** published a *Harvard Business Review* [article](#) with our colleagues which introduced a new approach to personal and professional development: the idea that receiving affirmation is a powerful way for us to grow, particularly when it comes in the form of stories describing moments when we are at our best. In this article we introduced the [Reflected Best Self Exercise \(RBSE\)](#), a tool based on our academic research which is now used by thousands of people globally in corporate trainings, team building, executive

leadership programs, and in graduate and undergraduate courses in a variety of disciplines.

Research stemming from this work shows that people benefit significantly from positive feedback about their strengths and contributions. It fosters healthy emotions, builds personal agency and resourcefulness, and helps to strengthen the quality of our relationships with colleagues, friends and family members. Sharing information about our reflected best selves with new colleagues as a part of onboarding processes also increases job satisfaction and reduces employee turnover.

Going through the full Reflected Best Self Exercise itself provides concentrated, if infrequent, dose of positive feedback. But there are organic ways that you can learn about and activate your best self at work every day as well. We've seen this more continual approach help people find new opportunities to develop parts of themselves that get lost in the daily demands of work, notice new ways of crafting their jobs, or take new steps towards longed-for callings. This article highlights five practices for noticing and capitalizing on everyday opportunities for development based on your best self.

### **Notice Positive Feedback**

Most people are well-attuned to critical feedback; it is jarring, threatening, and emotional, and as a result, quite memorable. In contrast, it is often easy to let positive reflections on our actions subtly slip us by. Lingering in the glow of praise can also feel uncomfortably immodest. It therefore takes practice to savor moments of positivity and to hold them in your memory.

To capture these moments, create a space (digital or physical) where you save any positive feedback that you receive. This could include thank-you notes, comments written in your formal evaluations, or references to your work in email threads. And don't limit this collection to your professional life: feedback about your personal life can be equally powerful.

When you get mixed feedback, tease apart the positive and negative aspects. Doing so will create mental space for you to focus exclusively on the positive feedback for a concentrated period of time and to use it to build an understanding of what you should keep doing. For example, professors who receive course evaluations from hundreds of students could form a peer-coaching partnership with a trusted colleague. You would each be responsible for pulling out the positive comments from your respective course evaluations and placing them into your Kudos file.

Once you have a stash of positive feedback, set a time in your calendar to review and revisit it regularly, giving yourself the opportunity to look at it with fresh eyes. Ask yourself: What patterns or themes can I identify? What opportunities can I find to express more of my best self? What more can I learn about these strengths, and who might provide that perspective? While some people may prefer to do this on their own, it's also great to partner with a trusted friend or coach. For example, the professors in the story above could make twice-yearly early dates with a trusted colleague to share positive feedback stories and help each other interpret them and think creatively about how to incorporate what they learn into their courses.

## Ask Questions

Don't just accept positive feedback; inquire into it so that you can better understand exactly how you made an impact. The key is doing this in a way that doesn't seem egotistical, allowing others to see that you are not only receptive to but grateful for their feedback.

For example, follow up on praise. We often brush off compliments, because we aren't comfortable receiving them. But they are actually an opportunity for learning—though only if they are specific and storied. Try to unpack generic labels and vague comments; seek to understand what worked well for you and for others in specific situations. Say: “Thank you for noticing X; your feedback made my day! Could you tell me what about my actions seemed to have a specific impact on you? I am trying to figure out what my strengths are so I can continue to make a positive impact at work.”

During formal performance evaluations, ask for one detailed example of the strengths your manager identified. Ask too if there are any other opportunities they know of where those strengths could be used. For example, after getting feedback that “team meetings seem to go better when you are there,” one professional we know asked her boss if there were other meetings where her calm presence and facilitation skills could be used to improve group conversations. Her boss realized that she could be useful at an upcoming customer forum, and a new outlet to display her strengths was born.

Research shows that managers avoid giving specific, actionable praise, so it may be up to you to make the first move in asking about the things that are going well in your job, and then probing deeply enough to get a concrete answer. For example, in a one-on-one meeting with your manager, say: “I am trying to learn more about how I contribute at work,

so that I can continue to build upon and leverage these contributions. As my manager, you are likely to have the best perspective on when, where and how I make a difference in this organization. Could you give me a specific example of a time when you think I was at my best and added value to your team?”

Consider setting up a meeting with a mentor or coach to discuss *only* your strengths and how you can develop and leverage them for greater impact. Set up a separate discussion to talk about your developmental opportunities in your areas of weakness. Because bad feedback has a stronger hold over us than good, it is nearly impossible for you to focus on both strengths and weaknesses in the same meeting. If you provide feedback to others, consider using this practice to help your employees grow and thrive.

### **Study Your Successes**

Conduct after-action reviews of your own work to set benchmarks and identify best practices for future work. Use the example of sports teams: review the “tape” to identify what went well, and to develop future “plays” based on what you find.

If you receive positive feedback in person, take some time after leaving that interaction to write reflectively about the experience, creating a short narrative about what you did and the impact it had. Journaling is a powerful practice, and can help you see ways in which you can bring out your best self. For example, an intellectual property director we know took up journaling to try to boost his personal and professional development. Reflecting on his entries allowed him to notice that he was best able to manage his demanding clients when he had an informal dinner with them the night before where he often got some hints about the client’s interests and concerns. This client preview boosted his

confidence and put him at ease and allowed him to be fully present in the more formal meetings. Once he understood this, he began holding these informal dinners more regularly—allowing his best self to come forward more consistently. This resulted in stronger relationships with clients, and ultimately a promotion.

Also take time to reflect on your strengths more generally. For example, how can your strengths complement your weaknesses? And consider the shadow side of your strengths: how can your weaknesses overpower or lead you to misapply your strengths, and how can you avoid this occurrence?

Once you make a practice of analyzing your best self by noticing positive feedback, asking questions, and studying your successes, you will develop a more holistic and cohesive understanding of the contents of your best self and the contextual factors that allow you to bring this best self into your work. The next steps help prepare you to bring this best self to life in two ways: practicing and paying it forward.

### **Practice Enacting Your Best Self**

In particularly toxic environments, it can be hard to get any affirmation at all. Finding ways to enact your best self in these contexts can be personally empowering, especially during low points in your workweek, work year, or career. Here are some options:

Bring aspects of your best self from another domain into the workplace. Find some outlet or channel where you receive affirmation for your valued contributions. This may require you to think more broadly about your best self, going beyond the walls of your immediate work environment, and then bring what you have learned from being a valued contributor elsewhere back into your work. For example, if you



are part of a religious community, alumni club, or community organization, or an organizer of neighborhood potlucks, mine these different roles for positive feedback about your strengths and contributions and import them into your work role. For example, if your family describes you as a joyful tinkerer, fixer of all broken tools and technology, consider how you might bring that to work. One of our clients received best-self feedback about organizing several large-scale events that brought different members of the community together; this helped her to see how she might use this same approach to bring together her professional stakeholders in leading a major internal change initiative.

Create space in your job for your best self to show up. If you can, craft your job so that at least one aspect of your role brings out your best self. If your job is truly difficult, find even a narrow set of tasks in which you can draw on your best self to offset the less gratifying aspects while you consider the long-term viability of your tenure. We often feel most valuable at work when we can see the impact we have on others. Therefore, finding roles and outlets that allow you to give to others at work or in your professional community is likely to be an important way to create space for your best self to show up.

When you receive negative feedback, try considering it alongside of the positive feedback stories you have in your file. Reminding yourself of how you create value will reduce your defensiveness and provide you with the self-confidence and agency you need to carefully consider opportunities to use that negative feedback for growth. Identify the aspects of your best self that will help you rise to the challenge of incorporating the wisdom within negative feedback, and discern how to progress without losing your sense of self.



## Pay It Forward

The best way to remember to focus on your best self is to intentionally share rich feedback with others about theirs. This practice can invoke a norm of reciprocity, whereby this form of feedback exchange becomes customary. At the close of a project, for example, share an observation of how each member of your team made a really meaningful contribution to the team. Closing festivities are a natural place to share best-self feedback, but you can also share your thoughts through written emails or letters, or one-on-one, if your time and schedule allow.

Dale Carnegie and John Maxwell likened the process of developing people to mining for gold: you must move tons of dirt in the process, but you go in looking for the gold, not the dirt. Similarly, people who recognize and affirm others' contributions can bring out the best in themselves and others more consistently. Remember, becoming your best self and bringing out the best in others is a life-long journey. With courage, curiosity and commitment, you can use best-self development to positively transform yourself, your relationships, and your organizations.



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