MODULE 3
Using Feedback to Fuel Progress

In a returnship, you are determining how to apply the skills you already have to today's workplace challenges. You're figuring out the inner workings of your new company and learning how your role has changed since your break.

As a result, constructive feedback is the single greatest gift you'll get through this program.

While there's no doubt you are talented and experienced in your field, it's important to recognize that everyone has room for improvement. In order to ramp up most effectively, we encourage you to embrace every ounce of input your manager and peers have to offer. In this guide, we'll discuss what constitutes "good" feedback, how to deal with the inherently emotional aspect, and strategies to solicit and get the most valuable feedback possible.

> "We all need people who will give us feedback. That is how we improve."
>
> — Bill Gates

What is Your Relationship With Feedback?

Despite feedback being a necessary tool you can use to improve, the act of receiving it can often feel personal. It's very easy to equate a performance review to a critique on your personality or even a question of your intelligence.

Since feedback is so crucial to having a successful experience, take a moment to consider your own relationship with it using the below questions:

- Do you typically seek feedback proactively or do you wait for your manager to approach you? Does it come as a surprise?

- How have you responded to feedback in the past?

- When has feedback been helpful to you? How did you apply it?

- Have you ever gotten feedback you didn't like or disagreed with? How did it make you feel?

- How often do you conduct self-assessments?

There are no "wrong" answers here. Instead, think of an honest self assessment as the first step in taking control of your own growth. Consider your answers in regard to what would be most helpful in your returnship. Which habits will you keep and which are you hoping to phase out?

Defining "Good" Feedback

Good feedback is synonymous with constructive feedback. What you're looking for is feedback that has the following markers:

Frequency
Regular conversations about progress in real-time allow you to measure your growth, show areas of improvement and keep the focus on both your manager's expectations of you and the goals you have for the program.

Specificity
Rather than a simple "great job", the best feedback gets into the details, and advises where your work is strongest as well as where you have the most opportunities for growth.

Action items
Good feedback enables you to apply it. It should give clear direction as to what you can do to make the work better or at least point you to a resource to further strengthen your skills.

Managing Up

Though your managers are quite competent and have great intentions, they are also human. Just as receiving feedback can be uncomfortable, giving it can be awkward too. That being said, managers who are aware of returners' uniquely challenging role may be either too nice and accommodating, or go the other way and be especially critical in order to help you improve.

As a general rule, if you get a month into your returnship and you haven't received constructive feedback, you probably aren't receiving real feedback. Consequently, you may have to "manage up," or take the driver's seat, to engage with the process. Here are some tools you can utilize to ensure you are receiving proper, actionable feedback.

5 Tips to Solicit Feedback

As we touched upon in Module 1, the growth mindset is key to integrating helpful suggestions and building your skillset. From formal performance reviews to peer comments, feedback can be delivered in many ways. Make sure you are utilizing others, as well as your own judgment, in your daily routine to maximize and inform those official feedback conversations when they do take place.

1. **Self-assess.**
    Before you can ask others how you are doing, check in with yourself. Consider your strengths as well as areas that need the most development. Then, bring your selfassessment to your peers or manager. You'll signal that you're open to feedback and reduce the possibility that you'll get an unactionable or surprising response.

2. **Treat everything as feedback.**
    You may be thinking that in order for advice to "count," you need to have a formal 1:1 session with your manager. Instead, consider stopping by their desk, messaging them for a quick question, or making a suggestion in the team meeting. Their response counts, even if it is quick and to the point.

3. **Reach out.**
    Ask colleagues and mentors what they believe to be the critical skills for success in your role. After all, they know what it takes to make it in the role—they're doing it full-time already!

4. **Keep a job log.**
    Note your accomplishments and ongoing responsibilities. As we suggested in Module 1, you can email weekly status reports to managers to keep them informed on your progress. If you're ever stuck or feel like you haven't accomplished enough, flipping through your notes can remind you of all the things you've learned.

5. **Reiterate and update your goals often.**
    Just as your manager's expectations for you will expand, your goals will change frequently. Refer to the Returnship Success Plan you created in Module 1 and clearly outline the steps needed for each new goal. Noting upcoming projects and future goals can inform how you treat your daily tasks and approaching deadlines.

Troubleshooting "Bad" Feedback

We've all gotten requests that came with unclear instructions. Having your manager say, "This just isn't what I envisioned" about your work can likely leave you feeling lost. So how do you get feedback from a manager who isn't forthcoming? Here are our tips to solicit useful feedback and follow up in a way that impresses your manager.

Scenario #1: Your manager keeps blowing you off and you're not able to get any feedback.	
Ask for it… then ask for it again! Managers are busy, so be sure you're asking for feedback often.	"Could I get your thoughts on my project? I know this assignment is a critical one and want to make sure I deliver the results you need. Just 15 min of your time would be great."
Work with your manager to develop frequent check ins on your progress, such as a daily/weekly meeting or email update.	"I want to make sure I give you everything you're expecting. Could we meet for 15-30 min every Tues/Thurs so we can stay on the same page through my time here?"

Scenario #2: Your manager's expectations are unclear.	
Ask for clarification when needed. This shouldn't be a one-time conversation. As your skills develop, expectations will likely increase or change.	"Do you have some time to chat about my current tasks? I want to double-check that I understand what you are looking for…"
Use the "start/stop/continue" method. Come with actions you'd like to start, things that you believe aren't working and therefore can stop, and items to continue since they are leading to success.	"I'd like to learn more and start sitting in during your X team meetings. And if possible, I'd like to stop daily calls with the Y team, we can scale back to weekly calls…"

Scenario #3: The only feedback you get is "You are doing great, don't worry."	
Ask project-based questions, as they can foster a targeted and beneficial discussion	"How can I take this project to the next level? Do you have time to go over what I have so far?"
Try using open-ended questions, rather than questions that can elicit a yes or no response.	"What are our stakeholders' most pressing concerns? I think X is the top priority, is that right? How can I help?"
Use your self assessment as a springboard.	"I feel as though I am stronger in X than I am in Y. Could we discuss ways for me to improve or any resources that are available?"

Scenario #4: You are receiving conflicting instructions from different managers/teammates.

Loop them in an email chain or ask for a debrief where you can all get on the same page. Outline what you have heard from each person and summarize in writing. Whenever possible, look for a potential compromise.	"I know how complex this process is, and appreciate all of the guidance I've received so far. I wanted to see if the three of us could meet for 15 min to be sure we're all on the same page regarding next steps. I've listed an action plan below as a starting point for discussion…"

**Bottom line: Ensure you have clear, actionable next steps and execute them.**

Ladder of Inference

As you learn more about your organization, try to avoid making generalizations or uninformed opinions about your company, role, manager, or your own performance. If you're unsure of how you're doing, don't work yourself up and form beliefs based on uncertainty. Soliciting feedback and obtaining real information are the surest ways to avoid unproductive leaps in logic and taking steps up the Ladder of Inference.

Popularized by Chris Argyis, the Ladder of Inference is the framework used to describe how people quickly move through receiving an observable piece of data to make assumptions and conclusions. While drawing on previous experiences to inform future encounters is a very good human trait, it's not without its drawbacks. The danger occurs when we form conclusions without all of the facts.

Scenario: You notice a calendar invite including what looks like the entire team but you're not on it. You've convinced yourself that you're not a valued team member and that your long-term prospects aren't looking good. How to climb down the ladder of inference? Take a deep breath (that always helps) and reach out to your manager; mention that you noticed a team meeting that you weren't included in. You can advise that you were hoping to share some ideas for a project and worry you missed out. It may turn out that the meeting to discuss your project is actually being held next week, and the meeting you weren't invited to was for another project you're not assigned to.

Ultimately, the best way to get the truth and help others help you is by being vocal immediately — in a professional manner — rather than ruminating and coming forward with built up emotions. Your team will be thankful for the clear communication and will be more likely to involve you in future projects.
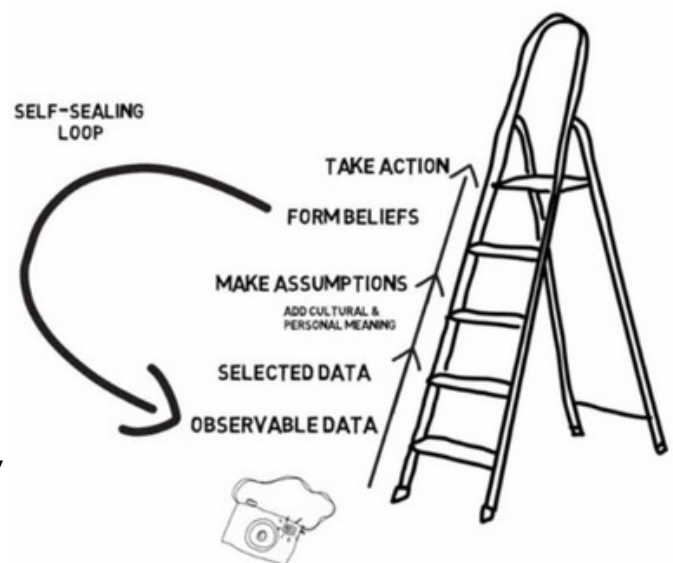
Fuel Your Progress

No matter how great – or not-so-great – the feedback, it is ultimately up to you to implement change or seek further action. If you are struggling with soliciting or incorporating suggestions, reach out to your fellow returners or other trusted peers for some tips and guidance. Similarly, you can always depend on teammates to clarify your manager's style or company dynamics; our next module will detail ways you can connect, request advice, and build a rapport with those closest to your work. Until then...

Path Forward

Join Path Forward volunteers, alumni, and your fellow returners in our online community to find helpful advice, resources, networking, and more.