

## Getting Actionable Feedback

Just as successful marathoners establish a personal training program that continuously increases endurance, a CEO must do the same. For a CEO, that training program provides actionable information. Getting honest and accurate feedback will help you to successfully complete the marathon and prepare for the next one.

### The Feedback Challenge

The real challenge for every CEO is to get the honest and actionable answers to their questions. Superficiality and anything less than absolute honesty can actually impair progress. Every CEO should develop a systematic information gathering process with their board. The same approach can extract accurate and actionable information from employees and customers. The process you develop must become part of your leadership style and become ingrained in many of your daily interactions.

### The Feedback Framework

An effective feedback process can be built on a simple 3-step framework

1. Ask the right questions
2. Trust answers but verify
3. Track answers over time

Let's look at each of these principles in more detail using some practical examples.

### Ask The Right Questions

Ed Koch, a memorable mayor of New York City in the late 1970s used to routinely ask people on the street "How am I doin'?" in his recognizable NY accent. He received feedback of all kinds- some positive, some negative but mostly with platitudes and generalities. Definitely not actionable feedback!

Don't make the same mistake talking to your directors. The more specific the questions, the better the information you'll receive. Better information leads to more effective action.

Change the "how am I doing" to questions like:

- What are the 2-3 things you think I do really well?
- What are the 2 or 3 things I could improve on?
- What are the 2-3 issues the board is most interested in?
- What frustrates you most in our board meetings?
- What additional information do you need from me to help you be a better director?

### Why You May Not Get Good Feedback

Fundamentally, I am recommending that you ask questions in a way that provides specific information rather than generalities. There are two reasons you may not receive specific information. First, you may not be asking questions in the right way. It takes practice and patience. The cost for a poor question is low—only a lost opportunity. Experiment and find what works for you and the person you’re talking to. The second reason may be reluctance on the part of your director to provide clear specifics. Maybe they fear hurting your feelings or de-motivating you. That’s why it’s always good to start with “positive questions”: identify specific things that are going right before jumping to things that are going wrong.

Asking follow-up questions for additional clarification also yield excellent additional information and improve clarity.

### Track Answers and Cross-Verify

Capture the information you receive in any format makes you comfortable. I’ve found Evernote to be very useful for this function. Our memories fade fast and a succinct set of feedback notes is very valuable.

Ask each director the same questions, confirming common feedback areas and exploring new ones. Never assume that the feedback from one or two directors represents the feedback of others.

### Track Answers Over Time

Using your notes for reference, periodically ask the same questions over again in future discussions. Good questions never lose their value. Over time as you become more comfortable and practice, your questions will evolve to changing circumstances and issues.

In summary, taking the time to develop your capability to ask good questions that provide actionable information is a foundation for CEO success. It takes practice and stamina, just like running the marathon.