

How To Handle Unexpected Feedback

Sometimes feedback catches us off guard. When that happens, we have choices in how we respond.

Start with “Thank you.” Just that.

It’s kind of simple, but powerful. Why? Because feedback – especially the kind we don’t anticipate – can be a gift. It reveals things we might not see on our own. Even when it’s hard to hear, it can illuminate real barriers to growth.

Our first reaction isn’t always our best.

It’s natural to feel defensive or even hurt. That’s our brain trying to protect us. But if we pause and say “thank you for sharing that,” we create space to reflect instead of react. That moment of grace helps us shift from resistance to curiosity.

Feedback gives us options.

We can look at feedback simply as information. What we do with it is entirely up to us.

Here are three ways to approach feedback that feels uncomfortable or unexpected:

1. Set it aside.

You can acknowledge feedback and decide not to act on it. That’s valid. But if the feedback highlights something that’s holding you back, ignoring it might mean missing a chance to move forward.

2. Explore it.

Feedback is filtered through someone else’s perspective. It’s not always the full story. Ask trusted colleagues or friends who will give you an honest assessment (not with the intent to prove yourself right, rather with the intent to explore)

- Have you noticed this in me?
- Does this align with your experience?
- What might I try instead?

Gathering multiple viewpoints helps you see the fuller picture.

3. Act on it.

Think back to school – corrections weren’t personal, they were meant to help us learn. That’s still true. Feedback can help us:

- Identify what’s maybe not working
- Notice blind spots (we all have them)
- Adjust how we show up

It’s a tool for growth, if we choose to use it.

Whether it’s a formal review or a casual comment, feedback can be viewed through the lens of an opportunity, if we choose to see it that way.