The Feedback Paradox

FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to Emotional Leadership, the podcast for high achieving leaders, with your host Master Certified Feminist and Leadership Coach Emily Leathers. Because healthier emotional lives means stronger leadership, thriving teams and much bigger results.

Welcome I'm so happy to see you all again.

Today we are talking about the Feedback Paradox.

I had the immense pleasure of taking Kara Lowentheil's Advanced Certification in Feminist Coaching this spring. I very much love Kara's work, and it was an immense treat to have her share many years of research and understanding of how our brains are socialized and the principles that make feminist coaching practices different from other coaching practices. It's shifted how I define success for myself, how I handle stress and anxiety, and how I define my role as a coach. What I'm going to share with you today was my final project from that course. It's resonated a LOT with everyone I've talked about it with so far, and I hope it does for you too.

And, quick pitch, if you have been certified through the Life Coach School I strongly suggest you go into the certified coach site. Look under advanced training. Kara's next round is opening soon and I think they are still taking up applications. I really hope to see you in the alumni group soon.

Now, let's dive in!

Intellectually most of us want lots and lots and lots of constructive feedback. But we also often avoid asking for it and can become emotionally distraught when we believe we've received some constructive feedback.

That is a really interesting paradox and what I wanna dive into today is why so many of us experience that paradox?

The messages we absorb from society - our socialization - have a big (and mostly unconscious) impact on how we view ourselves, how we define success, and how we interpret the words other people say. Like Feedback

In this episode we're going to talk about the Feedback Paradox, one of the ways those socialized messages might be impacting how you think about receiving feedback.

So let's start from that first half.

Intellectually, we want constructive feedback - and lots of it.

Do you have a Growth Mindset? That is: Do you believe that intelligence and skill can be developed? If so, you're like most of the leaders I work with.

Intellectually we're excited by the idea of growing, of learning, of doing new things. We believe that we'll always be capable of more tomorrow than we are today, and we find that idea exciting and motivating.

We know that two of the most helpful things for our growth are getting exposure to ideas outside of our own ideas and experiences and increasing our self-awareness, and that constructive feedback from other people is a great source of both. Right, it helps us get exposure to other people's ideas and experiences, and when we see ourselves through other people's eyes, we gain self awareness. And constructive feedback can often also feel like an investment from a manager or a mentor. And it might signal that they care about our career and want to help us grow. Those are all great things, but on the other hand.

Emotionally, we often deeply dislike the experience of constructive feedback - and therein lies the paradox. This is the Feedback Paradox.

If we want constructive feedback, why can we feel so threatened and upset when we actually hear it?

To understand that dichotomy, I've found it helpful to think about the messages I've absorbed from society about success, work and how to evaluate myself.

We call the messages we absorb from society via our friends, family, media, education and more socialized beliefs. They're thoughts our society offered us that we've adopted (usually unconsciously) as our own. (And for the record they're no more true or false than any other thoughts we have.)

There are three socialized beliefs I've found particularly useful in helping me understand the Feedback Paradox and I wanna walk through each of those with you today. The first
A person's value in the world comes from their accomplishments. The second is: As a woman, other people's opinions of me are more accurate than my own.
And the third socialized belief that I wanna talk about today is: As a woman, it's important that everyone thinks well of me at all times.

You may not have adopted all of those beliefs from the society around you, and you may have internalized each of them slightly differently from how I or someone else did. But if you grew up in Western society (and plenty of other ones) you were definitely exposed to these ideas.

These are also not the only beliefs we're socialized with, or the only socialized beliefs that might play a role in your Feedback Paradox. You've likely accumulated a large array of socialized beliefs tailored to your identities and how they intersect. In this episode we're going to focus on these three, but I encourage you to use this exploration as a template for your own exploration of what other socialized beliefs impact your personal willingness to ask for constructive feedback.

So now we're going to talk about each of these three beliefs, why I'd encourage you to question them and how they may play into your personal Feedback Paradox.

Let's start with socialized belief number one: A person's value in the world comes from their accomplishments.

If you frequently hear a voice in your head say "ugh, maybe I'm not as good as I think I am. Maybe I'm just a failure," our first socialized belief is probably a major player in your personal Feedback Paradox.

As a member of a society with many capitalist and Protestant underpinnings, one of the beliefs I'd absorbed without noticing it was each person's value in the world is based on their accomplishments.

Nobel Peace Prize winners were better people than me, because they'd accomplished things that were more important than I had so far. Makes sense, right?

Except, if this is a socialized message you absorbed, your brain may be pulling in two different directions as you're listening. One one hand, you hear it say "Of course I don't believe that! Everyone is equally valuable." And on the other you hear it say: "What do you mean accomplishment doesn't matter? Having an impact is the goal of life, otherwise I'm just being lazy. Of course that Nobel Peace Prize winner is a better, more valuable person than me."

I'm sure you can see the moral challenges with this belief. But I want to highlight some of the practical challenges as well, and how this socialization contributes to the Feedback Paradox for many people.

When we believe that our own value is based on our accomplishments, it creates a made up "good enough" line that we're constantly trying to stay on the correct side of. Imagine this as a line stretching out in front of you and on the left the end says less accomplishment and on the right it says more accomplishment. And there's some just dotted lines hanging out in the middle somewhere that are labelled good enough. And somewhere along that line there's a little dot labeled you. And we spend a lot of our day trying to make sure that dot stays on the side of the good enough line that's the same side as more accomplishment.

Because the socialized belief doesn't include a predefined place to anchor that "good enough" bar, we do this funny thing where most of us put it either just behind or just ahead of where we perceive ourselves to be.

We kind of just anchor it to where we are. There is no reason for that, it's just something I see people do over and over including in my own brain. And then we often turn this into a lifelong campaign to stay ahead of that arbitrary (and often undefined) "good enough line". We either "time out" our previous accomplishments so we have to keep accumulating new ones or we move the line as our accomplishments increase.

If you grab the Podcast Guide for this episode I have some diagrams that show both the lines I just described. I know hearing visual things verbally can be really challenging. It also has a graph that shows how this good enough line can change over time, and how that maps against our accomplishments the way I was just talking about.

This belief can also lead to competition, comparison and judgement, stemming from the idea that you need to be constantly outperforming yourself and your peers in order to remain "good enough." So let's dig in on this one a little bit.

If this belief isn't true, and we know it's not true because it's a thought, and thoughts are never actually true or false. Why is it so common in our societal messaging? Well, I wanna put two ideas in front of you.

The first is if you're one of the people in power in the society and you benefit from the labor of other people, making accomplishment (which is often conflated with labor) a moral good and "lack of accomplishment" a moral failing helps create a workforce that's more focused on meeting their own perceived "good enough" bars than on whether the working conditions in your organization are healthy.

I just wanna pause and let you think. Is that relevant for you at some point in your work history? Is it relevant to your peers or your family? When you're focused so much on accomplishments and on making sure you keep up and that you are good enough, you don't really deal with the fact that the environment around you isn't a very healthy one and it wasn't necessarily designed to be a very healthy one?

And the second reason for this to be such a common part of our societal messaging.

If you are someone in power in the society who is afraid of other members of your society working together to reduce your power, keeping those other people locked in competition against themselves and against each other can be an effective distraction, to keep them from focusing that energy on you.

So, we've talked a little bit about why this message exists, if it isn't a good and a healthy and important true one for us to believe. Now let's talk a little bit about specifically how it helps create the Feedback Paradox.

So if you're constantly working to stay on the right side of the "good enough" line, then it's easy to interpret constructive feedback as putting your assessment of yourself, your skills and your accomplishments in question, and so threatening your "good enough"-ness. Instead of welcoming constructive feedback as an opportunity to learn new ideas and increase your self-awareness, you worry that it's a signal that you're actually further below the "good enough" line that you'd thought you were, or are below it when you thought you were above it.

This mental perception of threat is likely to create very similar reactions in your body to a real physical threat: adrenaline from your sympathetic nervous system encourages a fight-or-flight response. We get defensive. We look for ways to leave the conversation. We sit in emotional and physical discomfort. And if we anticipate having that reaction to feedback, we definitely don't ask for much of it.

Let's move on to the second socialized belief: As a woman, other people's opinions of me are more accurate than my own.

If you hear a voice in your head respond to constructive feedback from someone else with worry about whether that other person judges you as "good enough," this second socialized belief is likely a player in your personal Feedback Paradox: "As a woman, other people's opinions of me are more accurate than my own."

People who are socialized as women in patriarchal societies are taught to trust other people's opinions of us over our own thoughts about ourselves. So if we perceive someone else as telling us that we're not good enough (regardless of whether that's what they actually mean), we've been socialized to believe that opinion as evidence of our amazingness.

Hopefully it's pretty clear why I'd encourage you to question this belief!

It's also likely pretty clear why this is part of our societal messaging: Patriarchal societies place men in power over women. This is a lot easier if women are taught to believe what other people tell them about themselves over what they personally believe about themselves.

So how does this help create the Feedback Paradox? Well, when we believe other people's opinions of us matter more than our own, we often go looking for validation from other people - especially those

we consider to be in positions of power in relation to us. This can cause us to hear their constructive feedback as a fatal judgement instead of as a single piece of input for us to consider as part of a much bigger picture.

This socialized belief also has interesting interactions with beliefs that opportunities for impact or advancement at work are gate kept by our managers or other people in power in the organization.

We might believe that our opinion of ourselves is more "accurate" than the other person's opinion of us, but still treat their opinion as more "important" because we believe their opinion is what blocks or unlocks career opportunities, compensation increases and more. So we believe our opinion of ourself, but we believe that the other person's opinion of us can hurt us in some way or hold us back.

The second is, we might believe that in order to accomplish enough to stay on the right side of the "enoughness" accomplishment bar (from our first socialized belief above) we need the opportunities this person unlocks through their approval of us, and that anything less than their 110% approval could therefore threaten our ability to maintain our "good enough"-ness.

Now let's dig into the third socialized belief.

As a woman, it's important that everyone think well of me at all times. If you hear a voice in your head respond to feedback with worry about that person's comfort or a desire to "fix" everything so they'll think 100% positive thoughts about you, this final socialized belief is likely a player in your personal Feedback Paradox.

People who are socialized as women are taught that what matters most is what other people think of them. This can create thought habits where any perceived negative opinion from another person (even a complete stranger or a hypothetical person we made up in our mind) is a DEFCON 1 emergency. This is more black-and-white than whether our accomplishments are enough for the "good enough" bar. It's just the simple boolean belief that if there's a single person on the planet who doesn't think 100% amazing things about us 100% of the time then we are automatically "NOT good enough."

It's likely clear why a patriarchal society would want to socialize women this way: It's a lot easier to control the people you're oppressing if they're fixated on making everyone around them pleased with them at all times. It's also a lot easier to exploit them with minimal pushback if you've taught them that their highest good is to make you happy.

A little bit of food for thought: If you can think of a single person who you're okay with being annoyed, frustrated, disappointed, angry or disapproving of you in even the tiniest sliver of a way, you can see why I'd encourage you to question this socialized belief. Do you really want the leader of a hate group to believe you're an awesome person they agree with 100% of the time? Yeah, I didn't think so.

So how does this belief help create the Feedback Paradox? Well, in societies where we're taught to equate our work with our identity and our accomplishments with our value (see socialized belief number one!), constructive feedback about our work is often mis-interpreted as negative opinions of us as a person - which then violates this third socialized belief. The belief that "As a woman, it's important that everyone thinks well of me at all times."

This socialized belief can be especially challenging when we don't create a clear distinction in our head between corrective feedback, where someone is communicating that there's a gap in our performance that the organization needs us to address in order to meet the expectations of our current job, and growth feedback, which is just advice and ideas. Both are forms of constructive feedback, and when we believe that it's important everyone thinks well of us at all times the part of our brain that's on constant lookout for danger is likely to mis-categorize growth feedback intended to be supportive and nurturing as evidence that that person has a negative opinion of us.

So, being aware of these socialized beliefs and how they might affect your willingness to ask for constructive feedback is a great first step towards breaking out the Feedback Paradox.

But I'd like you to also consider whether they're beliefs you want in your brain at all.

You can't replace an existing belief with a vacuum. We've talked about that over several episodes. If you want to replace a belief, you have to choose a new belief to practice in its place.

I can't tell you what you should believe instead of the socialized beliefs we've talked about in the last few sections. Only you get to decide the thoughts you want to believe. I'd encourage you to spend some quality self-coaching time thinking through how these three socialized beliefs might be impacting your life outside of the Feedback Paradox, if you want to replace them and if so what you want to believe instead.

To get you started, I'm happy to offer you a few alternative beliefs that I've found valuable.

Humans exist to enjoy life; nothing more, nothing less. I get to choose what I enjoy in life.

My value is 'indispensable to the world'. My value is not mutable - it never changes. Everyone's value is equal - we are all indispensable.

My actions do not and cannot impact my value. I am indispensable in the world.

The types of actions I take do not and cannot impact my value.

Other people's opinions of me do not and cannot impact my value. I am indispensable in the world.

I decide what to believe about myself.

It's okay to be seen as exactly who I am. It's my job to help anyone I want to see me to see me.

Now, before we finish this episode there's one final idea I'd like to share with you: asking for feedback from sufficiency.

When you ask for feedback from a place of sufficiency, you break out of the Feedback Paradox because you stop framing constructive feedback as a potential threat. That's the heart of what this paradox is all about. We want the feedback but we see it as a threat and we run away from it and we try to avoid it.

This is what it looks like, in practice, when you manage your mind around constructive feedback and the three socialized beliefs we've talked about in this episode: When you ask for feedback from sufficiency you already know that you're great. And you know that there's lots of room for growth in your career that you're excited to keep exploring. You're not looking for the other person to validate your greatness for you. You're not wondering if you're good enough and looking for the other person to help you decide yes or no on your "enough"-ness. And you're not looking for confirmation that they think you're 110% perfect at all times.

Instead, you're curious about what you can learn about how others see the world. You're curious about how someone else's description of you could increase your own self-awareness.

You treat constructive feedback the way you'd treat an article on leadership you found on the internet: an interesting source of information, but something that needs to pass through your own filters before you decide what, if anything, to do with it.

When you view feedback from a place of sufficiency you ask for feedback regularly - not because you're looking for validation, but because the more you ask the more interesting ideas you learn about.

So are you ready to put this episode to work in your own life? I hope so, because we're now going to walk through a set of questions to help you coach yourself on where you avoid asking for feedback and why, how the three socialized beliefs from this episode may be impacting your willingness to ask for feedback, and how to change your current scripts so you ask for more feedback more often. You can find all of these questions written in the PDF Podcast Guide. Just click through in the show notes where it says get the podcast guide and see the full show notes and we'll send it right to your inbox from that page.

We're gonna start with your current model. Your current script, or way of thinking.

So what's a recent opportunity at work where you made a conscious decision not to ask for feedback?

Why would that feedback have been valuable to you if you had asked for it?

Now I want you to quickly in your head think about the thought that led to you not asking. What's the exact moment you considered asking for feedback?

And now what was your thought that led to the action of not asking for it?

If you're working through this and you've got a piece of paper, fill that in as a Model. Put the exact moment in the Circumstance line. Put didn't ask "Person X for Thing Y" (fill in your blanks) on the Action line, and just fill in the rest of that Model.

Now, what do you notice about that thought you had or the rest of your Model?

Now let's explore that paradox in your head a little bit through this situation. In this episode, we talked about several reasons you might avoid asking for feedback. We are going to dig in to each of them a little bit.

So, what imagined feedback where you protect yourself from that might have prompted thoughts doubting your good enoughness.

Why would that feedback prompt you to doubt your good enoughness?

If you weren't being influenced by the socialized belief that a person's value in the world comes from their accomplishments, how else would you have interpreted that feedback?

Now, we're gonna look at belief two. We're going to use the same situation still.

In not asking for feedback, was there imagined feedback that you were protecting yourself from that you might have used as evidence to doubt your own opinions of yourself?

What would you have assumed was the other person's opinion of you, based on words that you imagined they might say?

Why would you have chosen to trust what you thought their opinion of you was over your own opinion of you?

And if you weren't under the influence of the socialized belief "Other people's opinions of me are more accurate than my own," how would you have interpreted that feedback instead?

Now let's dig into that third socialized belief we talked about.

What imagined feedback we're protecting yourself from that might have prompted thoughts that someone thinks less than a hundred percent well of you?

Why is the feedback you imagined receiving, why would it prompt you to think that they had a poor opinion of you?

 If you weren't being influenced by that socialized belief "It's important that everyone think well of me at all times," how else might you have interpreted that feedback instead?

And now let's plan a little bit for the future. The next time you are in a similar circumstance, do you want to ask for feedback? It's okay if you don't! Why or why not?

Let's imagine that you do want to ask for feedback next time you are in a similar circumstance.

What would you need to feel in order to ask that same person for feedback?

Now, what would you need to think in order to feel that way and follow through on asking them?

Now I want you to evaluate that thought. Would you be asking for feedback from a place for sufficiency? Would you be walking in assuming you were great, that you are indispensable to the world, that you don't need that person to think one hundred percent positively of you at all times?
That having room to grow doesn't mean you are not good enough. Would you be asking for feedback for sufficiency? If not, pause, think of another thought where you would be.

Now, last question for today. How will you practice that thought? Cause if you practice it now it's going to be so much easier to think about that at the moment, so much easier to ask for feedback.

Alright! That's it for this week. I hope you have an amazing week, I will see you again soon and definitely jump in to those shownotes, click through to the full show notes and download the Podcast Guide for this episode. Alright! See you soon.

If you loved this episode, I want to share two empowering ways we can work together:

If you're a leader in the tech industry creating culture change at work, I'd love to invite you to join me in The Leadership Lab as a Founding Member. Our community is built for leaders like you, who want to have a big impact in the world, drive meaningful improvements in the culture of your company and team, AND do that in sustainable ways so you don't burn out and so you don't need to be constantly working to keep those culture improvements in place. Join us at exceptional.vision/leadershiplab.

And if you want to dive deeper into improving your own emotional health so you can feel better and have bigger results at work, I invite you to join me for a one-on-one chemistry call. We'll talk about where you are, where you want to be, and create a solid plan to get from here to there. Just visit exceptional.vision/chemistry. See you there!

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