



Difficult Conversations & Feedback

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Taya R. Cohen, PhD

Professor of Organizational Behavior
and Business Ethics

Carnegie Mellon University
Tepper School of Business



Difficult Conversations

Difficult conversations: discussions about issues that people might find uncomfortable or be hesitant to raise

- Often required for team members who are working together to accomplish a shared goal

Examples:

- addressing behaviors that negatively impact the group
- voicing an unpopular perspective
- talking through a disagreement
- providing constructive criticism on a teammate's work.

Ubiquitous and necessary conversations, but often people avoid them or handle them poorly



Reflections

Take a look at the following reflections and contemplate what these reflections suggest about difficult conversations.

1. During a homework assignment, I realized that my partner had misunderstood the requirements and was approaching the problem incorrectly. Since we were close to the deadline, I knew I had to address it quickly. I called them and politely explained the assignment's expectations, walking through the key points to clarify the misunderstanding. At first, they seemed surprised, but once I showed them specific details from the assignment, they appreciated the clarification. We adjusted our approach, and in the end, our submission was much stronger.
2. In a previous team project, I noticed that one of my colleagues was submitting work that didn't meet the agreed-upon quality standards. Their sections often required extensive revisions, causing delays and frustration among the rest of the team. As the project progressed, the issue worsened. Other teammates also grew frustrated, and we ended up having to stay late to compensate for the extra revisions. Looking back, I wish I had spoken up sooner with a supportive approach, as it could have helped both the individual and the team as a whole.

What do these reflections suggest about difficult conversations?



Difficult conversations can strengthen relationships

- You may worry that a difficult conversation will hurt your relationship with others. However, such conversations are not as harmful as people fear. We often underestimate the benefits of honestly communicating our opinions and feedback.
The reflections demonstrate that a difficult conversation handled well can not only improve the team's performance but can also strengthen relationships among team members.
- By contrast, frustration can build up when we put off or avoid having difficult conversations which can sometimes lead to behaviors that diminish team morale and negatively affect the team's ability to do good work. Thus, ironically, by postponing difficult conversations to avoid hurting feelings or damaging relationships, we may cause more harm than if we had addressed the issue earlier.
- Many people avoid difficult conversations because they lack experience holding these conversations and are unsure of the best way to proceed.

Scenario 1. Teammate not responding to messages.

Which option do you think would lead to a more productive discussion?

Option 1A	Option 1B
<p>The reason for this conversation is that I have been talking with several other members of the team and we all have been getting frustrated because you aren't responding to our messages. This is a team project, and when you don't respond, it feels as if you don't respect us and don't care about the other parts of the team. How can we get you to provide more timely responses to our questions?</p>	<p>The reason for this conversation is to discuss challenges with communication in our team. Last week team members sent you multiple messages asking for information and several are still waiting for responses. When we don't get timely answers, it makes it hard for the rest of the team to move forward on other parts of the project. You may not have realized how much our team depends on your expertise in answering these questions. Is there a challenge or obstacle that is making it difficult to respond promptly? Let's discuss what we can do as a team to make sure that everyone gets timely answers to their questions.</p>

Scenario 2. Expressing disagreement with the team's direction.

Which option do you think would lead to a more productive discussion?

Option 2A	Option 2B
<p>Our current plans and milestones include feature X. I'm concerned that this feature adds a lot of complexity, which could ultimately distract us from doing a good job on the mandatory features described in the specifications document. I understand why we might want to include it, though I'd love to hear more. Could we return to our specifications document, review the goals we have for the project, and discuss the potential benefits versus risks of including feature X?</p>	<p>Our current plans and milestones include feature X and I just don't think it's necessary. It looks good, but it will distract us from our core goals and will put us behind schedule. I think we need to get rid of it and focus on the mandatory parts of the project.</p>



A Framework for Difficult Conversations

- You may have heard of various strategies for handling difficult conversations...
 - Ex: sandwiching criticism between two positive statements (“feedback sandwich”)
 - Ex: sharing your thoughts and feelings with “I statements” (nonviolent communication)
- These approaches are often unclear about what needs to change and why, and they introduce unnecessary information that can confuse recipients or lead them to be skeptical of the feedback or the communicator’s intentions.
- **By contrast, the framework described in the handout focuses on holding a clear, specific, and respectful conversations.**
 - The framework components can be mixed in different amounts and orders depending on the situation, the people involved, and the broader context.

Step	Explanation
01. Set context, describe behaviors	Describe specific situations, issues or behaviors. Help others understand what you are referring to (e.g., specific behaviors or issues) and why you are having the conversation (general rationale). Focus on the behavior and not the person or personality so that it is clear what actions are needed to create positive changes
02. Explain impact on shared group goals and values	Describe how the situation or behavior has affected (or will affect) the group or others in the group. Focus on harms and threats to goals and values that everyone in the group shares—or show how a change is needed to realize the group’s goals and values.
03. Acknowledge others and ask about their perspectives	Demonstrate respect and openness to other viewpoints. If sincere, acknowledge the positives in others’ perspectives and demonstrate curiosity about others’ viewpoints. If you are worried that your statement will hurt feelings, express concern for the other person’s well-being and/or future success.
04. Jointly identify a path forward	<p>Invite the other person into a problem-solving process. The more tense and difficult the relationship or conversation, the more important it is to commit to a process for proceeding. Some common ways to structure a group decision include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Hearing from everyone in the group before continuing.● Reviewing statements of goals, specifications, criteria, etc. and agreeing on a shared vision before discussing next steps.● Committing to a decision-making process of listing and prioritizing all criteria and then listing all options and systematically discussing the pros and cons of each option on each criteria before ranking the options.● Seeking outside opinions or new information before proceeding. <p>The focus should be on agreeing to steps for moving forward.</p>

Step	Example 1
01. Set context, describe behaviors	<i>The reason for this conversation is to discuss challenges with communication in our team. Last week team members sent you multiple messages asking for information and several are still waiting for responses.</i>
02. Explain impact on shared group goals and values	<i>When we don't get timely answers, it makes it hard for the rest of the team to move forward on other parts of the project.</i>
03. Acknowledge others and ask about their perspectives	<i>You may not have realized how much our team depends on your expertise in answering these questions. Is there a challenge or obstacle that is making it difficult to respond promptly?</i>
04. Jointly identify a path forward	<i>Let's discuss what we can do as a team to make sure that everyone gets timely answers to their questions</i>

Step	Example 2
01. Set context, describe behaviors	<i>Our current plans and milestones include feature X.</i>
02. Explain impact on shared group goals and values	<i>I'm concerned that this feature adds a lot of complexity, which could ultimately distract us from doing a good job on the mandatory features described in the specifications document.</i>
03. Acknowledge others and ask about their perspectives	<i>I understand why we might want to include it, though I'd love to hear more.</i>
04. Jointly identify a path forward	<i>Could we return to our specifications document, review the goals we have for the project, and discuss the potential benefits versus risks of including feature X?</i>



Customize the Framework

- **Using the framework can help you focus on group goals and values, be specific about the behaviors and impacts, and enlist others to identify a path forward.**

Customize the framework to fit the person and the situation.

- **Your knowledge of the person and their reactions:** Use your specific knowledge of the other person to modify the framework to be effective. For instance, a person who is defensive might respond best in private and may also need more kindness, whereas others may be more motivated by a public discussion or need more accountability.
- **The cultural context:** Different regional and organizational cultures have different expectations for communication. Some cultures value directness, simplicity, and precision in communication whereas in other cultures good communication is sophisticated, nuanced, and layered, with messages implied rather than directly expressed.



Factors to Consider

- **Whether the conversation should be public or private:**

Private conversations can help individuals process negative feedback and be receptive to critical information, which is important if the other person is likely to experience negative feelings such as shame or embarrassment.

However, public conversations provide transparency and allow the group to jointly problem solve and address issues at the group level.

- **Which communication medium to use:**

In a face-to-face conversation, you can use your voice and body language as well as your words to communicate information. In addition, you can see other's responses in real time and adjust your communication accordingly. Face-to-face communication also allows you the opportunity to make instant clarifications or corrections if you sense that someone misunderstands.

On the other hand, asynchronous communication, like email or messaging platforms, gives you more time to respond thoughtfully and others can reflect on the message privately.



Factors to Consider

- **Whether this is the 1st, 2nd, or *n*th time you have had the conversation:**
If you have raised this topic before and the issue recurs, you may need to switch tactics, though many of the framework components can still be useful. For instance, it may be helpful to **ask “why?” questions until you uncover a root cause.**

*More information on repeat difficult conversations appears in the FAQ



Activity (in pairs)

- **Scenario A: A team member has submitted confusing and poorly organized code to the group. You suspect the code was generated by AI and will lead to errors and lack of alignment with other parts of the project.**
- **Scenario B: A team member has shown up for team meetings over 20 minutes late multiple times and has not provided any advance notice or acknowledgement.**

Use the Google Form. Submit 1 form per pair.



Activity (in pairs)

For each of the scenarios, write out a script for opening a conversation onto this difficult topic. Your responses should be realistic – what you would **actually** say in the scenario

Use the Google Form. Submit 1 form per pair.

<https://forms.gle/RMBd3dFiBKv8Xk9b6>

Step	What you might say
01. Set context, describe behaviors	
02. Explain impact on shared group goals and values	
03. Acknowledge others and ask about their perspectives	
04. Jointly identify a path forward	



Listening During Difficult Conversations

- The success of difficult conversations does not just depend upon finding the right words to say: it also requires effective listening.
- You may sometimes find yourself in a situation of receiving feedback that challenges you.
- Receiving feedback well is a skill and can be improved.



Difficult Conversations Wrap-Up

- Difficult conversations often go much better than expected, especially when all parties effectively communicate with one another.
- Having difficult conversations is a skill. Improve your skills via practice.
- ***Complete the Post-Class Survey. You received a personalized link via email.***

For more on difficult conversations:

- **Hidden Brain: Why Conversations Go Wrong with Dr. Deborah Tannen.**
<https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/why-conversations-go-wrong/>
- **Hidden Brain: The Truth about Honesty with Dr. Taya Cohen**
<https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/the-truth-about-honesty/>



Difficult Conversations Frequently Asked Questions

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Should I talk about my feelings?

When deciding whether to explain the emotional impact on you personally, consider whether it is reasonable to expect them to care about your feelings. If the person is a friend, it may be appropriate to discuss how their actions affect your friendship. However, if you are not close to them, it may make more sense to leave feelings out and focus on how their actions impact the team and its work.



How does the difficult conversations framework compare to the “praise sandwich”?

- The “praise sandwich,” in which criticism is sandwiched between two statements of praise, adds ambiguity and can confuse recipients about the purpose of the conversation. While you should be kind and concerned about others’ well-being when you are initiating discussions that may be difficult for them to engage in, you should avoid including irrelevant information just for the sake of being positive. If you do include praise when having a difficult conversation or providing feedback, make sure that it is specific and relevant to the work of the team.

I see how your framework is useful for the first conversation, but what if I previously raised the issue and nothing has changed?

Changing behavior is hard! There are many reasons why your teammate may not have changed their actions: maybe they didn't fully understand your request or did not fully agree with the rationale; maybe they did understand but just had trouble putting changes into practice.

The second time you have a difficult conversation on the same topic, focus on understanding the barriers to implementation. Remind your teammate of the conversation and ask them for their perspective on what the team agreed to and the obstacles to implementing that agreement. Keep an open mind and try not to judge what you hear. A good strategy is to continually ask "why?" until you uncover the root of a problem (often called root cause analysis). Here is an example:

Problem: A teammate consistently turns in work after the deadline the team agreed to.

Why?: The teammate frequently has a problem meeting deadlines

- *Why?:* The teammate often gets distracted and pursues options that are not immediately relevant
 - *Why?:* The team does not always communicate its priorities clearly and the teammate does not have effective strategies for maintaining focus.

The root cause appears to be a combination of insufficient communication about task priorities and a lack of training or resources on time management and focus strategies. Once you have identified potential root causes, the team may experiment with strategies for addressing these issues, such as clearly articulating priorities and recommending focus strategies. However, this support may not be sufficient to overcome habits that have accumulated over a lifetime. In this case, the team may need to establish consequences for continuing an undesirable behavior. Such consequences should be motivating and not punitive. For instance, in the case of the distracted teammate who does not submit work on time, a consequence could be notifying someone in charge as soon as a deadline is missed so that someone with more authority can step in.



Additional Information on Effective Feedback

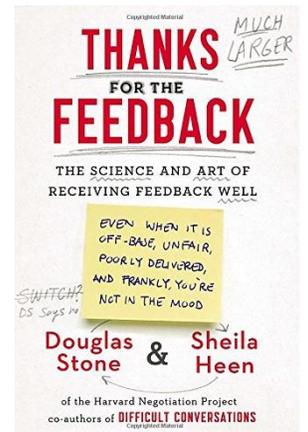
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WHAT IS FEEDBACK?

- Feedback is information provided to recipients about their behavior, performance, or understanding.
- Feedback provides recipients with a comparison of their performance to a certain standard or goal with the aim of helping the recipient improve
- The purpose of feedback is to facilitate self-awareness and behavioral reinforcement (*positive feedback*) or change (*improvement-oriented feedback*)

FEEDBACK IS REALLY 3 DIFFERENT THINGS

- 1. Appreciation:** motivates and encourages
- 2. Coaching:** helps increase knowledge, skill, capability, growth, or raises feelings in the relationship
- 3. Evaluation:** tells you where you stand, aligns expectations, and informs decision making
 - *Evaluation is often the loudest and can drown out the other two.*



BENEFITS OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

- Effective feedback facilitates better relationships, better performance, and better employee and organizational outcomes
- McKinsey & Co. study compared top-performing firms to middle-of-the-pack firms on basis of financial performance.
 - What did the top firms do differently? Among other things they...
 - Made effective use of performance reviews
 - Emphasized management development techniques
 - Encouraged candid feedback

HOWEVER...

- People are generally bad at giving feedback
 - Employees often receive feedback that is overly positive or not useful
- Why?
 - Misjudge how much people want to receive honest feedback
 - Overestimate the emotional harm that honest feedback could cause
 - Underestimate the benefits and usefulness of providing honest feedback

EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK IS...

1. Goal-oriented

- Feedback should be focused on behaviors critical to achieving the recipient's goals

2. Actionable, Specific, and Timely

- Identify the specific behavior so the person knows what to continue to do or change
- *Do not describe the person*. Describe the behavior and the impact it had

3. Supportive, truthful, and useful

- "I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know you can reach them."

FLAWED FEEDBACK

1. Attacks the person rather than the person's behavior
2. Vague or abstract assertions
3. Without illustrations
4. Ill-defined range of application
5. Unclear impact and implications for action

REMOVE BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

- **Performance improvement happens when...**
 - Recipients are open to change
 - Perceive a need to change
 - Believe change is feasible
 - Set goals and take appropriate actions to implement changes
- Communicate so that recipients are **receptive** to the feedback and can **discern the truth** in the feedback.

COMMUNICATE YOUR SUPPORT

- **Express care for the recipient's well-being**
 - Express empathy and concern
 - Express joint outcome or involvement (“we are in this together; I am here for you; I care about getting you to your goal”)
- **Strive to understand how they are feeling**
 - What do they need? How can you meet their needs?
 - Ask questions and voice understanding (“I see; I understand”)
 - Summarize and paraphrase what the recipient is telling you to show comprehension
- **Validate their experience**
 - Acknowledge their feelings as justified and valid, Validate their effort and hard work, Express reassurance and encouragement, Express confidence in them

EVALUATING PERFORMANCE AND PROVIDING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

Russia	France	Italy	US	UK	Brazil	India	Saudi Arabia	Japan
Israel	Germany	Norway	Australia	Canada	Mexico	China	Korea	Thailand
Netherlands	Denmark	Spain		Argentina	Kenya	Ghana	Indonesia	

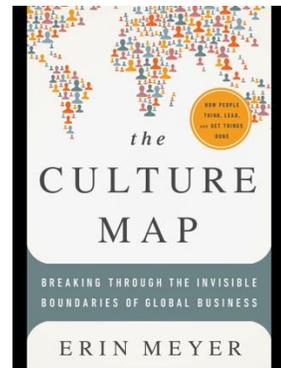


Direct negative feedback

Negative feedback to a colleague is provided frankly, bluntly, honestly. Negative messages stand alone, not softened by positive ones. Absolute descriptors are often used (totally inappropriate, completely unprofessional) when criticizing. Criticism may be given to an individual in front of a group.

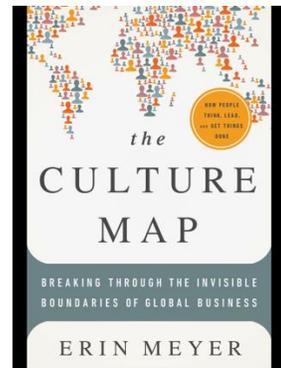
Indirect negative feedback

Negative feedback to a colleague is provided softly, subtly, diplomatically. Positive messages are used to wrap negative ones. Qualifying descriptors are often used (sort of inappropriate, slightly unprofessional) when criticizing. Criticism is given only in private.



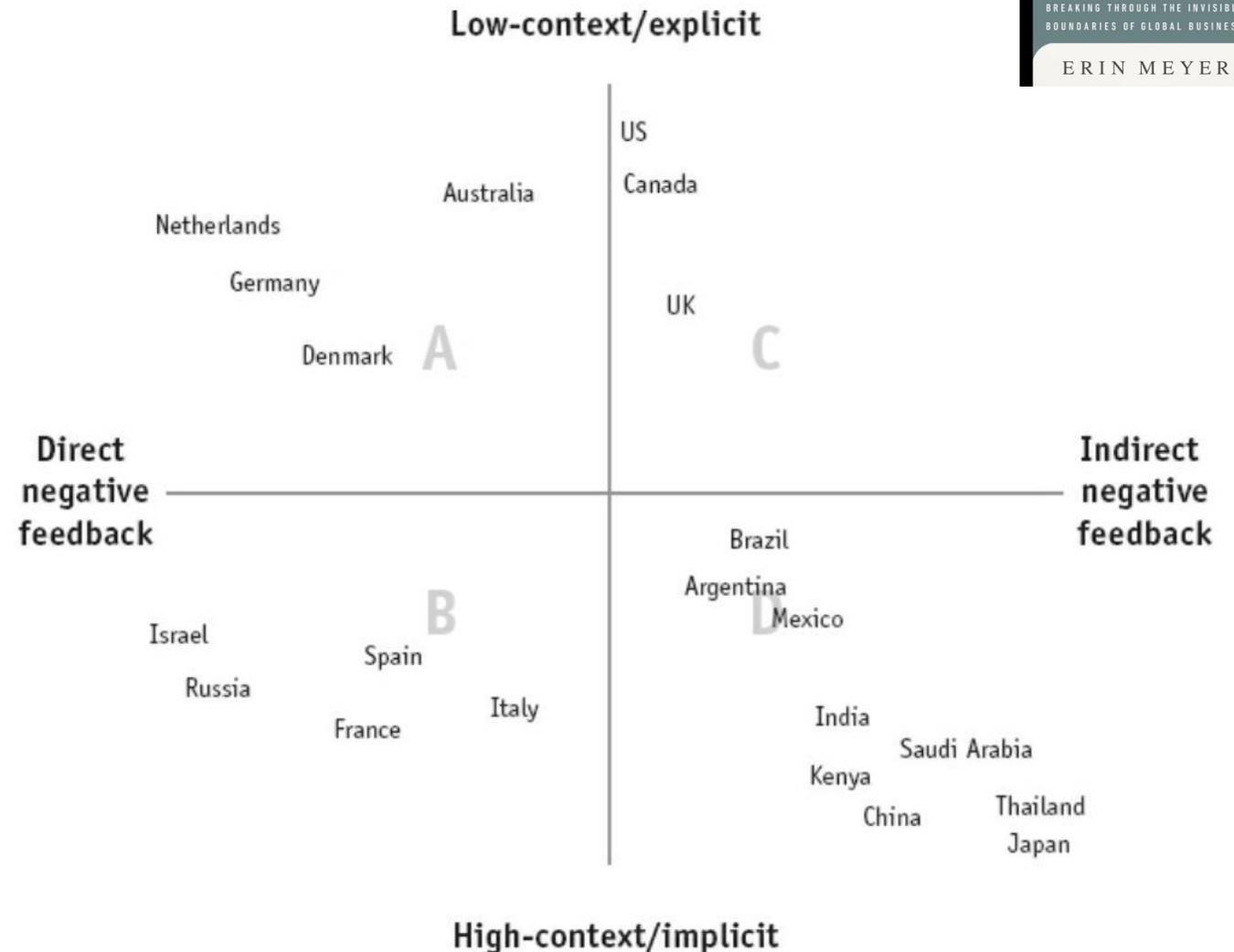
Meyer, Erin (2014). *The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business*.

COMMUNICATING NEGATIVE FEEDBACK ACROSS CULTURES



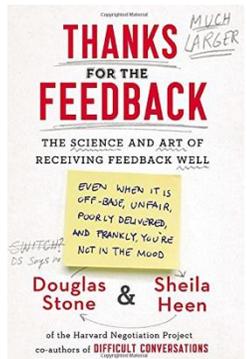
“Americans are stereotyped as direct by most of the world, yet when they give negative feedback they are less direct than many European cultures.”

Meyer, Erin (2014).
The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business.

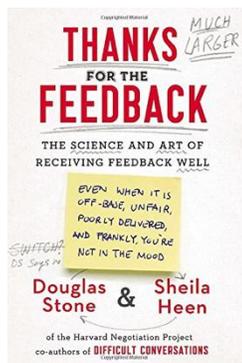


RECEIVING FEEDBACK

- High quality, thoughtful feedback is rare and valuable. Assume that it comes from a place of caring and desire to see you reach your full potential
- **Be explicit about your needs**
 - Do you want appreciation, coaching, or evaluation?
 - Do you have a preference for how you receive feedback?
 - Remind them to be honest—high-quality feedback can help you learn
- **Be prepared to listen with an open mind**
- **Ask often.** You can't get better if you don't know how you are truly doing. Express appreciation for their candor



Consider the reactions that feedback triggers and reframe.



Stone, Douglas & Heen, Sheila. (2014). *Difficult Conversations 2.0: Thanks for the Feedback*. Rotman Management Magazine. ROT237.

FEEDBACK'S THREE TRIGGERS

Triggered Reaction	Learning Response
<p>Truth</p> <p><i>That's wrong. That's not helpful. That didn't happen. I'm not like that.</i></p>	<p>Separate Appreciation, Coaching and Evaluation We need all three, but mixing them puts us at cross-purposes.</p> <p>First Understand: Shift from "That's Wrong" to "Tell Me More" Feedback labels are vague and confusing. The giver has information we don't (and vice versa). We each interpret things differently.</p> <p>See Your Blind Spots: Discover How You Come Across We can't see ourselves or hear our tone of voice. We need others to help us see ourselves, and our impact on those around us.</p>
<p>Relationship</p> <p><i>Who are you to say? I don't like/trust you, or believe you know better.</i></p> <p><i>I'm not the one who needs to change. You are.</i></p>	<p>Don't SwitchTrack: Separate We From What Talk about both the feedback <i>and</i> the relationship issues.</p> <p>Identify the Relationship System: Take Three Steps Back Understanding the feedback requires stepping back to see the relationship system and the ways we are each contributing to the problems that are creating the feedback.</p>
<p>Identity</p> <p><i>This is a disaster. I'll never recover.</i></p> <p><i>I'm a disaster. I'll never get better.</i></p>	<p>Our Wiring Affects How We Hear Feedback Individuals vary widely in our reactions to positive and negative feedback; extreme reactions colour our sense of ourselves and our future.</p> <p>Dismantle Distortions: See Feedback at 'Actual Size' Work to correct distorted thinking and regain your balance.</p> <p>Cultivate a Growth Identity The reality is that we are always learning and growing.</p>

Consider the following reflection (1)

A week before our final presentation, a teammate pulled me aside and pointed out that some of my data was outdated, making my conclusions less reliable. At first, I felt defensive because I had spent hours compiling research. But instead of reacting, I listened and asked him to clarify the key issues. Once I understood, I acknowledged the gaps and asked for suggestions. I quickly updated my sources, refined my analysis, and ensured my insights aligned with current market conditions. In the end, our presentation was much stronger, and I appreciated the direct but constructive approach.

What does this reflection suggest about effective listening in difficult conversations?

Consider the following reflection (2)

I took the lead on our project in organizing logistics, setting pricing, and ensuring smooth execution. However, midway through, one of my teammates pulled me aside for a conversation I hadn't expected. He told me that while my leadership kept things on track, I was not delegating enough, which made others feel like their contributions weren't valued. At first, it was difficult to hear because I thought I was just being efficient. However, I reminded myself that feedback, even when uncomfortable, is essential for growth. Instead of getting defensive, I asked for specific examples and listened carefully. I realized I had been making quick decisions without consulting the team as much as I should have. After that conversation, I made a conscious effort to involve everyone more - asking for their input on pricing, marketing, and customer engagement. The shift not only improved our team dynamic but also helped us work more effectively.

What does this reflection suggest about effective listening in difficult conversations?

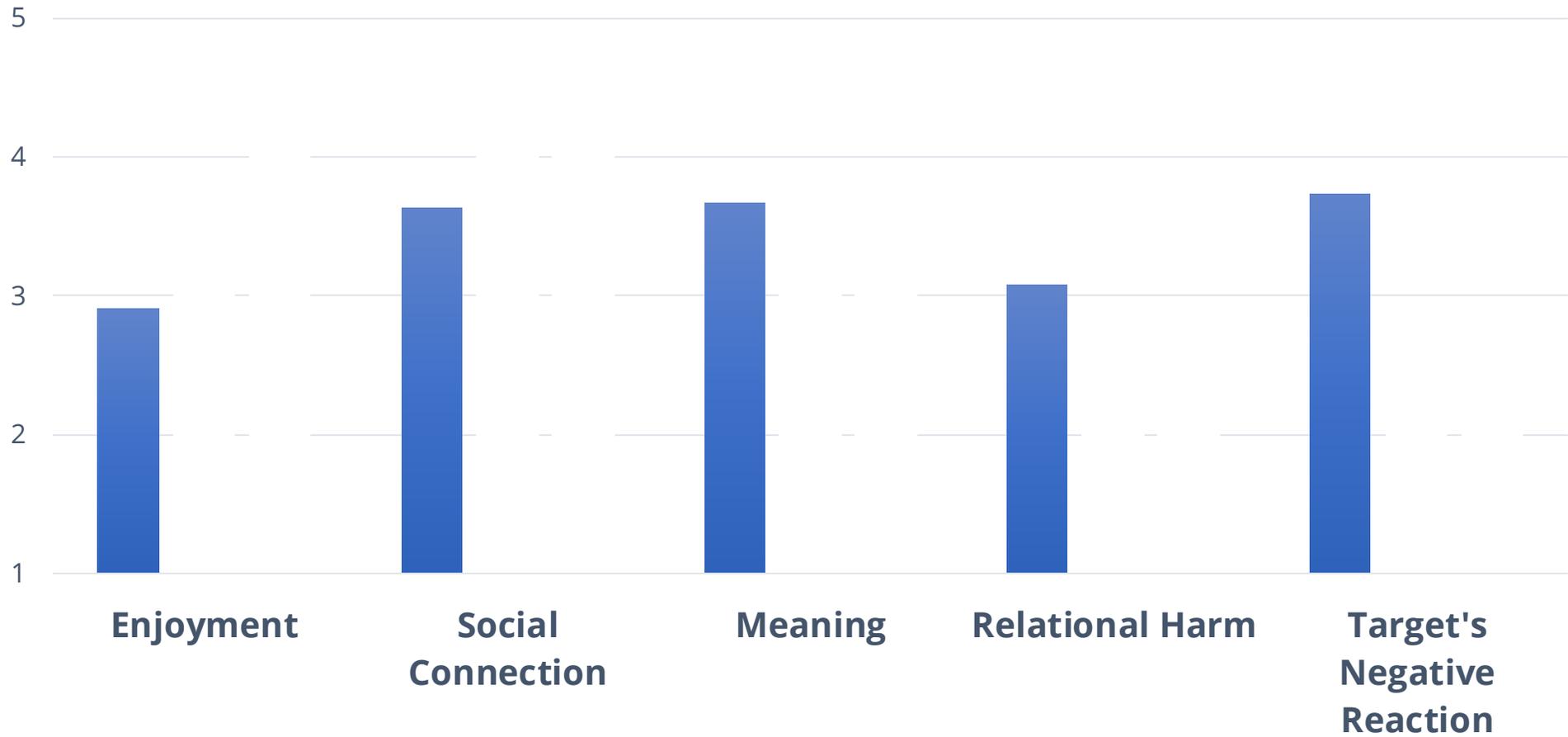


Honest Feedback Study

- 106 pairs of adults (roommates, friends, colleagues) in Chicago
- Anticipated what it would be like to have an honest feedback conversation and then had the conversation.
Provide one piece of critical feedback to the person you came to the lab with today. Share your honest opinions, feelings, and reactions about one thing you think this person should do differently, change about themselves, or improve upon.
- Communicators knew they would have to read their message aloud and engage in a conversation with their partner about it.

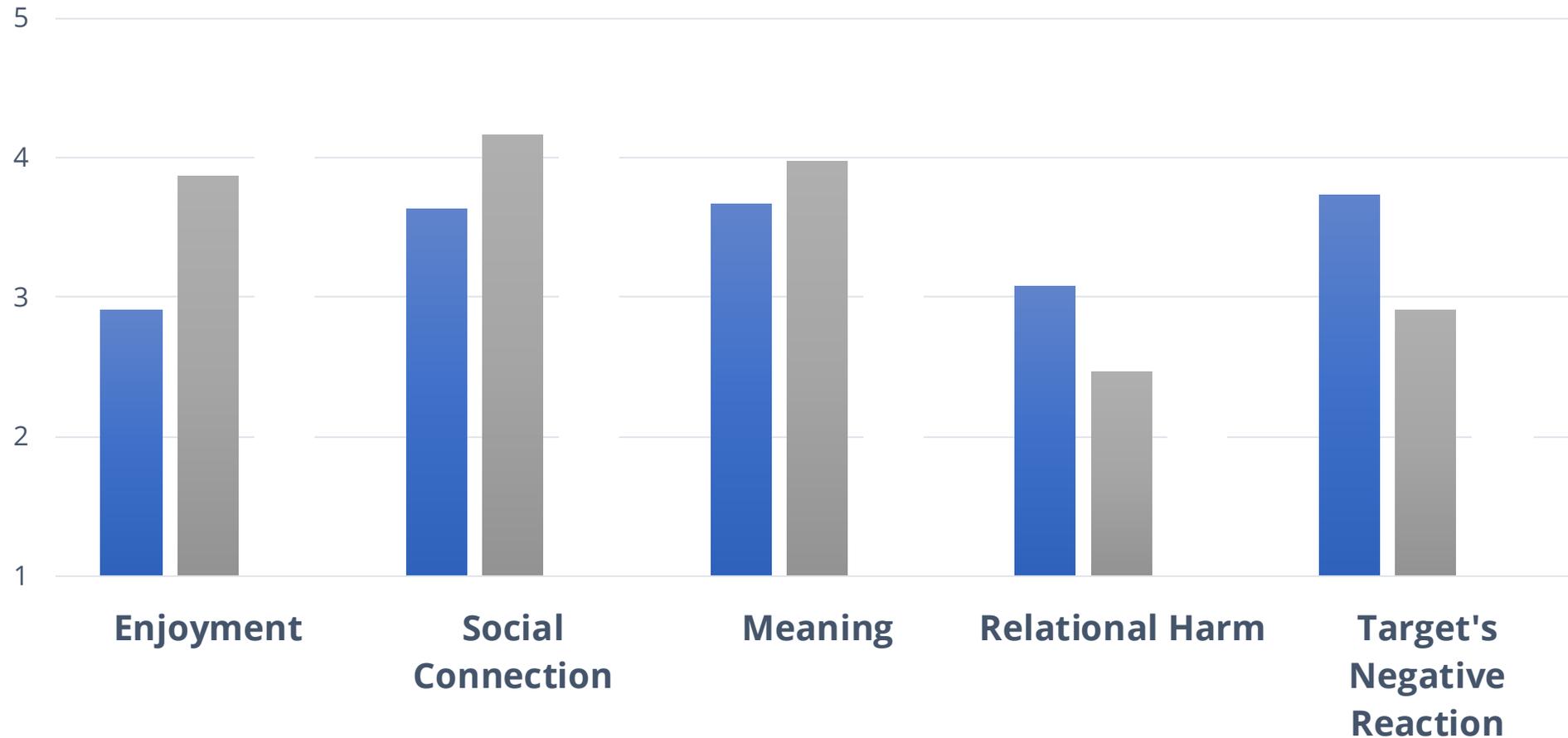
**Communicators' Forecast
Targets' Experience**

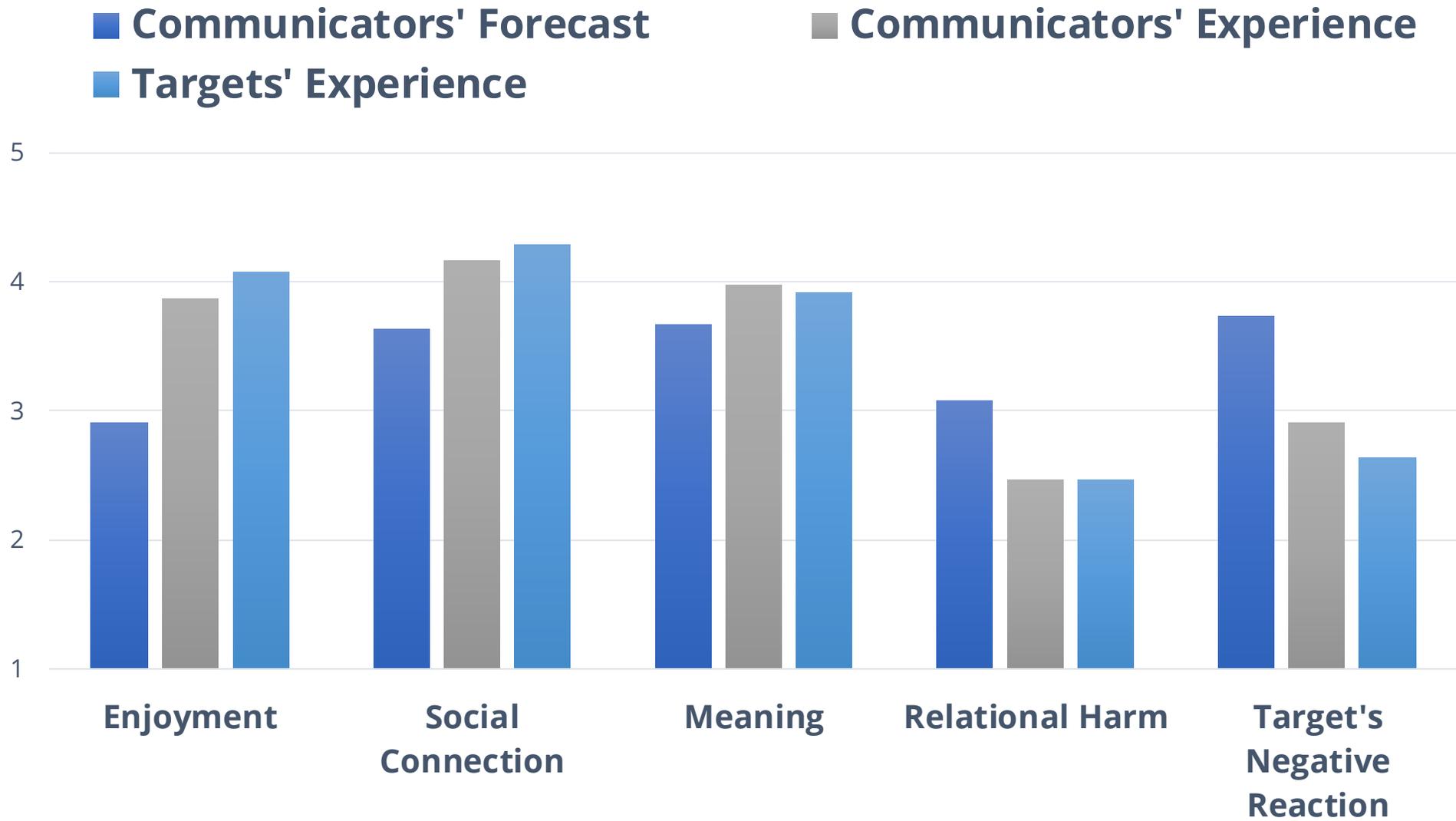
Communicators' Experience



**■ Communicators' Forecast
Targets' Experience**

■ Communicators' Experience





[STUDY 3] Levine, E. E., & Cohen, T. R. (2018). You can handle the truth: Mispredicting the consequences of honest communication. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 147, 1400-1429. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/xge0000488>