I Don't Want No Bad News – but I am Curious about This News: Our Polarized Reactions to Negative Feedback

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

Many years ago, Kurt Lewin provided us with wonderful insights about the dynamics of change—at a personal and institutional level. One of these insights concerned the phases of change and personal learning. He noted that we must first "unfreeze" before opening up to new ideas, learning and the possibility of change. At a later date, several of his students conducted research on and wrote extensively about the motivating force of "cognitive dissonance." When we are confronted with disconfirming or contradictory information and images of self, then we often become "unfrozen" – searching for ways to bring consonance back into our life and work.

Negative feedback is one of the major sources of dissonance and a fundamental determinant of our unfreezing. We want to retain a positive image about ourselves as competent and caring people. We certainly don't want to be told that our positive image of self is in any way flawed. As Dan Ariely (2012) (of behavioral economics fame) has noted repeatedly through a set of experiments he conducted or reported on, we are determined, as human beings, to preserve a positive image of ourselves and will distort reality and fabricate stories that maintain this positive perception of self.

Our attempt to re-establish consonance usually comes about by denying or ignoring the feedback. Alternatively, we either intellectualizing about the feedback (accepting it in principle but doing nothing about it) or providing a rationale or justification (for example "these folks don't really like me after I made that very hard but essential decision.") We would rather not "unfreeze" and will go to great lengths to remain frozen in place with our positive self-image intact. In short, we are resistant to negative information about our self and the role of an executive coach is to assist their client in "overcoming" this resistance. But is this the whole story? Is something more complex operating than just resistance? Are there other tools that can be used than just addressing the resistance? Does Lewin's "unfreezing" involve something more than throwing negative feedback in someone's face?

I suggest that there is often a polarity operating when we are faced with the prospect of receiving negative feedback. In this essay, I articulate the nature of this polarity and suggest several ways to address the tension that exists within the polarity. I begin by offering a few observations regarding why we don't like to receive negative feedback. Then I turn to the other side of the polarity: our lingering curiosity regarding this feedback.

Don't Want No Bad News!!

As a very strong, controlling character in the Broadway musical, *The Wiz*, says: "I don't want no bad news." We certainly don't want bad news about ourselves and, as Ariely noted, we will distort reality, and even regress to old style denial in order to avoid this feedback. I have already mentioned the powerful motivating force called "cognitive dissonance." It is important for each of us to preserve a positive image of ourselves and to believe that any flaws in our character are known to us and are being addressed in our own behavioral plan (the way we operate in the world – especially with other people).

Without this positive image, we are likely to feel helpless and ineffective. Why even get up in the morning if we are not hopeful that something good will happen in our life and our relationships with other people? Why try out anything new in our life if we assume it won't work and that we will be proven once again to be incompetent? We are likely to wind up depressed (and even a touch suicidal) without hope and a sense of personal effectiveness.

Behavioral economists, like Ariely, believe it goes beyond cognitive dissonance: throughout our life we have a compelling motivation to retain a positive image of our self. Our need for self-esteem drives many of our perceptions and actions – especially as these perceptions and actions relate to our interactions with other people. We can receive negative feedback when we stub our toe on a rock or when we realize that the coat we are wearing isn't appropriate given the weather we just confronted when opening the front door. We are usually quite open to modifying our behavior in response to this feedback. We look where we are going in walking through the rocky field. We put on a lighter coat or pull out our parka.

This simple process of adjusting to negative feedback usually doesn't operate so simply when the feedback comes for other people. Part of the reason that behavioral economics has generated considerable interest in recent years, is that it focuses in particular on the interactions among

people (whether in the marketplace or in our families). When dealing with other people, we are particularly resistant to negative feedback. Ariely (2012) shows us how we do a little bit of cheating during our life – and even a little bit of cheating about ourselves. We might even pay to not receive negative feedback about ourselves from other people. All of this is done in order to avoid disconfirmation about our positive self.

One final point. This resistance to negative feedback in order to preserve our positive self-image, might be even more challenging, given the multiple images of self that are common in our contemporary world. As Kenneth Gergen (1991) has suggested, we are "saturated" with the many ways we are expected to envision our self. We are expected to be good parents, responsible citizens, diligent workers, one of the beautiful ones (with the shape of a model or movie star) or a health-conscious non-smoker (or handsome cowboy smoker riding on horseback).

It is hard in a postmodern world to hold on to a coherent image—and there are many ways in which we can receive negative feedback about ourselves. We can be told that we are a bad parent, irresponsible citizen (because we didn't vote), or irresponsible worker (because we played "hooky" from work one day in May). We are told (subtly) that we still weigh too much or still have some bad habits. There are many ways to find out how we are not up to par – and so many ways in which to be resistant!

But I Am Curious . . .

With all of these good reasons to be resistant about negative feedback, we still, in some ways, want to know about what other people don't like about us. I am now working on a set of essays (published in this digital library and eventually a book that provide a new version of the widely cited Johari Window. I am suggesting in these essays (Bergquist, 2019) that we aren't really "blind" about how other people see us as Joe Luft originally proposed in presenting the Window (Luft,   ). Rather this "blind" quadrant is actually "opaque". We know at some level what other people think of us; therefore, we try to resist it. Much as Freud (1936) conceived of anxiety as a signaling device that alerts us to impending threat when we are touching on something that deep down has major negative implications for us, so we are aware at some level of the negative information that awaits us. We are signaling the threat of this negative feedback by becoming anxious and avoidant of the feedback.

There is an insightful statement out in the world that goes something like this: "Which one of us would not be taking the next train out of town if someone told us: you have been found out. Everything has been revealed about what you are really like and what you have really done." Underlying this statement is the assumption that this get-out-of-town knowledge about you might be something that no one has known before now. It was just discovered. More likely, this damaging knowledge has just been revealed. In the past, no one has been willing to tell other people—but now these "ugly facts" are all coming out and you are heading to the train station.

I want to offer one other observation. For a moment, lets stick with the train metaphor. We are fascinated with train wreaks (and car wreaks). We are drawn to the negative, the cataclysmic, the destructive. There is an important point to be made here: this often includes fascination with our own foibles. Carl Jung (1969) writes about this fascination in his insightful analysis of our unconscious processes. We are made up of many domains and layers of personality theory. Many domains operate in opposition to other domains (e.g. the masculine and feminine energies) and are always willing to point out (bring to consciousness) the failures of the competing domain(s).

At the heart of this conflict-filled world of Jung' psychic architecture is the "Shadow" – a domain that stands in direct opposition to what Jung identifies as our "Persona" (the mask we wear out in public). Our shadow is always trying to trip up the seeming competence embraced by the Persona and is fully aware of the negative feedback to which the Persona is entitled. The Shadow says "bring it on" so that our arrogant, ill-informed and denial-inclined Persona can find out the truth! There is even more to note about the "shadow" – it is the depository for a large collection of "truths" about us. As the old radio program called the "Shadow" declared: "the Shadow knows!!". No wonder we are heading off to the train station.

There is also a more rational perspective about our psychic functioning that is offered by the Nobel-Prize winning Behavioral Economists, Daniel Kahneman (2011). He identifies a process called "slow thinking". While we spend most of our time racing around under the dictates of fast thinking, there are times that we slow down (or should slow down) and become more reflective. Each of us knows that we are not perfect and that it is a good thing to be aware of and thoughtful about our areas of weakness. We are aware that there is much we can learn about ourselves – and this knowledge about our self typically resides among other people in our life.

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We know that the people who know us best (and have our best-interest at heart), can tell us things about our self that will be hard to hear but are important for our own ongoing maturity. We don't have to head off to the train station. Instead we can carefully listen to the "truths" other people have to offer. Ah, if only we were always so wise and courageous—the train is about to leave the station . . .

Close to Home

As the author of this essay, I don't have to go very far when illustrating the reactions to negative feedback. I serve as president of an independent graduate school. Several years ago, we conducted a major survey (called a "constituency analysis") with the students and alumni of my school. While the survey provided valuable information with regard to program offerings, post-graduate benefits of the school, and the role played by tuition level in decisions to attend the school, there were also additional comments made regarding the administration and faculty of the school. While virtually all of the comments were quite positive about me, as the president, there was one comment that struck quite a cord: "Bergquist is a big blow-hard and he should have retired many years ago!"

This comment was not easy to read. As Sigmund Freud would suggest, this comment triggered signal anxiety in me. My own self-image was threatened. In short, I was disturbed and resistant. As the person to whom this comment was directed, I took it quite hard and still recall the content of this comment and my reactions to it. It is still hard to read (and quote in this essay). As many studies regarding performance evaluations have revealed, it is usually the negative evaluations we remember – not the positive. Why is this the case – or why specifically was this the case with me? These comments had a lingering sting because in many regards they rang true. I am a blowhard and often speak too long or interrupt other people when they are trying to say something.

My Persona is fully operative! My Shadow function does a wonderful job of ensuring that I am aware of my verbosity and my dishonoring of other people with my interruptions. Furthermore, I have served as president of this graduate school for many years: maybe it is time for me to retire and let someone with new ideas and more youthful energy take on the challenges of leading a free-standing graduate school. This "un-kind" comment might in some ways be the "kindest" thing that anyone has shared with me. If only I would hang around and

not take the first train out of town (by becoming resentful and abruptly announcing my retirement or at least not conducting any more constituency analyses).

As I have noted in this essay, the negative feedback we receive can contain a kernel of truth about our behavior and the impact of our behavior on other people. There can be a "pandora's box" that opens a whole new body of information that is hard to absorb. I face many stressful challenges as president of an independent graduate school. Do I really want additional challenges? Honestly, can I handle anything more that is placed on my psychic plate right now? At my age, is there room for change and improvement? Am I permanently stuck in my ways ("can an old dog learn new tricks?")? Should I retire?

As these questions coursed through my mind (hopefully a bit of "slow thinking") and my heart (a whole lot of signal anxiety), I found that my own curiosity was aroused—and an additional question sprung up. Are other students and alumni simply being polite in offering mostly positive feedback – or are they being careful because of my formal power and authority at the school? Like the Wiz, perhaps my colleagues believe that I don't want "no bad news." And they might be right. But I was curious and wanted, at one level, to find out more about the validity of this survey respondent's comments. I didn't head off to the train station.

I know that my "blow-hard" behavior can also be interpreted as my "forcefulness" and "active engagement" in the life of people with whom I interact. My strengths (being articulate and persuasive) can also be my weaknesses when engaged too often or in an inappropriate manner. I also know, from my coaching and consulting work, that succession planning can be quite challenging for the person who will be succeeded. My own reflections on staying or leaving the position of president is critical.

Thus, at some level I recognize that the negative feedback I received was a gift—though not necessarily a welcomed gift. Both resistance and curiosity were swirling around my head and heart. There was a "learning-ful" moment here of which I should take advantage in my own "slow thinking" about interactions with other people. Perhaps, some "slow thinking" about a decision-point regarding my retirement from the presidency. I found myself at a place and time when I could reflect on and work through this feedback that I received. What king of reflective process might be most helpful in this regard? Perhaps a process called *polarity management*.

The Polarity of Self-Knowledge

If any of us are likely to retain both a resistance to negative feedback and a comparable level of curiosity about this feedback, then what does the interaction between these two forces look like? We turn to a remarkable analytic tool called polarity management in seeking some appreciation of this interaction. Barry Johnson (1996), the "dean" of *polarity management,* suggests that this tool can be used in handling everyday contradictions—settings in which there are two or more legitimate but opposite forces at work. We begin by analyzing each side's benefits and disadvantages.

BENEFITS: NO BAD NEWS

- Preserve positive self-image
- Retain cognitive congruency (especially important in my role as President and in my interpersonal relationships with students)

BENEFITS: BUT I'M CURIOUS

- Self-Preservation (take action to correct problem)
- At some level I already know where I need to improve and change (important in my role as President—practicing what I preach.).

DISADVANTAGES: NO BAD NEWS

- I am anxious about what I don't know
- I don't want to feel helpless/hopeless (just be in a state of denial: poor self-image)
- What if this bad news is accurate?
- Can I really change at this point in my life?
- Can I handle the stress of new information about myself?

DISADVANTAGES: BUT I'M CURIOUS

- This news produces anxiety and might hurt my ability to function as president
- I can't do much about it anyway (helplessness) (not a good place to be in as President – can hurt the entire organization)
- I don't trust the accuracy of this feedback (hard to know what "reality" is when in a position of power).

These initial summary statements regarding the pull between resistance to receiving the negative feedback and curiosity regarding the content of this feedback can be framed as a polarity. Here is what my polarity-based deliberations might look like if mapped out on a polarity management chart:

Support AND Challenge

Vertical Development

Action Steps
How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this left pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

A. Appreciative Feedback
B. Retain cognitive congruency.

Action Steps
How will we gain or maintain the positive results from focusing on this right pole? What? Who? By When? Measures?

A. Retain cognitive congruency
B. Self-preservation
C. Maintain curiosity about current state

Values = positive results of focus on the left pole
Upsides/Positives
1. Retain positive self-image
2. Psychological safety.

Values = positive results of focus on the right pole
Upsides/Positives
1. Constructive feedback
2. Psychological growth

Support and **Challenge**

A. Could open up other "truths" about me (Pandora's Box)
B. Adds stress to my already challenging presidency

Downsides/Negatives
1. Staying in a state of denial
2. Anxious about what I don't know

Downsides/Negatives
1. Perceived negative feedback
2. Not sure I can change at this point in my life.

1. Feeling of helplessness
2. Distrust of feedback's accuracy.

Fears = negative results of over-focus on the left pole **to the neglect** of the right pole

Fears = negative results of over-focus on the right pole **to the neglect** of the left pole

Stuck in Current State/Stasis

Early Warnings
Measurable indicators (things you can count) to will let you know you are getting into the downside of the left pole.

Early Warnings
Measurable indicators (things you can count) to will let you know you are getting into the downside of the right pole.

Facilitated by Margaret Cary, M.D. though she is not responsible for its final content

With this framing completed, we turn to what happens when we try to *maximize* the benefits of either side at the expense of the other side. In my case, the maximization of resistance to the negative feedback would lead to a shutting down of all new learning. I would be self-fulfilling my self-image of someone who is too old to learn and would become less effective as a leader of my graduate school.

Conversely, if I was totally open to the negative feedback from this one individual, as well as from other students and faculty members, then I would be indiscriminate in my monitoring of feedback and would become even more stressed in my job as president. As a result, I am likely

to be less effective as president of the school. I also could be vulnerable to a counter-reaction—feeling misunderstood and even betrayed by those I am "so diligently serving". This could easily lead to my shutting down and burning out. I might conclude at this point that I really should retire as president. I would no longer be a role model for lifelong learning (a key value in my graduate school).

Barry Johnson warns that we not try to maximize but rather carefully *optimize* the degree to which we are inclined toward one side or the other and for how long. Optimizing means that we must find a reasonable and perhaps flexible set-point as we take action in favor of one side or another. Finding these acceptable optimum responses and redefining them again and again is the key to polarity management. In my own work on this polarity, it is important for me to determine how open I will be to feedback of all kinds and how I determine what is valid and invalid, as well as what actions might I take to build on my strengths and reduce or isolate my weaknesses.

This might mean getting some assistance from my colleagues (such as members of my Board of Trustees) and/or from a professional coach or consultant. Going it alone is probably not a good idea—even though sharing my concerns, fears and hopes is not easy for me (and I suspect is not easy for most other people). It is particularly difficult in my role as president. In becoming more vulnerable, do I increase the level of anxiety among other members of the organization regarding my capacity to lead? On the other hand, by sharing my concerns and being open to new learning, I am modeling a fundamental value of my graduate school. I seem to have identified another polarity (or an aspect of my current polarity): appearing to be competent vs. appearing to be open to new learning.

As Johnson and others engaged in polarity management have noted, effective management of polarities requires a constant process of vigilance, negotiation and adjustments. My recognition of this second, closely related polarity seems to be aligned with this recommendation of dynamic vigilance. I must continuously seek and refine a dynamic, flexible balance—so that each side's beneficial contribution can be enjoyed, without engendering serious negative consequences.

Johnson also identifies the value inherent in setting up an alarm system as a safeguard against overshooting toward either side. It would be prudent to build in an alarm system that warns us

when we may be trying to maximize one side and am on the verge of triggering the negative reactions. The alarm signal for me might a growing sense of resentment against my colleagues, leading me to avoid extensive contact with the people in my work life. The signal might also be a growing sense of personal martyrdom: "why don't they appreciate everything I have done."

Hopefully, with the safeguards in place, I can address the negative feedback in a constructive manner. As a result, I might even be open to future feedback of many different kinds –and continue to model the role of life-long learner. This might still mean that I retire—but perhaps I will be leaving having left a legacy of openness and integrity. This would mean that I stay around long enough to learn and that I delay my journey to the train station . . . .

Seizing the Opportunity

In framing the reactions to negative feedback as a polarity rather than just resistance, we set the stage for productive reflection and perhaps an insightful conversation with other people in our life about the polarity. It is a matter of balancing support and challenge (a balance that the remarkable psychologist, Nevitt Sanford (1980), called a key to significant learning in one's life). How do we find the source of support within the feedback we receive when receiving the "bad news"? How do we frame this feedback as constructive and a source of psychological growth? A coach, consultant, or trusted colleague can play an important role in helping to set the conditions for this balance between support and challenge. They can help us create the polarity diagram (like the one I produced and displayed above). They can encourage us to sustain attention to those elements in the upper two quadrants that promote learning and ongoing personal and professional development.

Perhaps, even more is required for us to address negative feedback in a constructive manner and for us to navigate through the polarity. We might need more than a trusted colleague or trained professional. We might need a broader community in order to arrive at some accurate assessment of our own strengths, weaknesses and opportunities—and avoid heading to the train station. In essence, "I don't want no bad news" is ultimately a product of the culture in which we are living. A culture and community of appreciation and support provides a setting in which we can learn from all kinds of feedback. Ken Gergen one of the authors I cited earlier in this essay, goes one step further. Along with his wife, Mary, Ken Gergen (Gergen and Gergen, 2004, p. 71) suggests that it is in community that we can best define truth.

> There is no "Truth for all," but instead "truth within community." People who are called "ignorant" are not lacking all knowledge; they simply are not part of the community that may view them as such. They function with knowledge of a different kind, . . . Each group's knowledge functions in a different way for different purposes.

It might be that the multiple selves Ken Gergen identified in *The Saturated Self*, find coherence and guidance within a specific community. While there is no universal truth, there is truth within this community and one can find "truth" in the feedback being received if this truth is conveyed within this community and interpreted through the dialogue with one's colleagues in the community. I need not travel to the train station if I can turn to my own community at my school for thoughtful and supportive feedback and guidance.

Truth in Relationships

If we are able to find "truth within community" that enables us to address the feedback and polarities in our life, then perhaps this community can also assist us in moving even further and deeper into our relationships with other people: what is the "truth" embedded in these relationships? I am reminded of the work done by Chris Argyris and Don Schon (1993) (along with their colleague, Peter Senge) with the Left and Right Column exercise. One writes a segment of dialogue in the right column when dealing with a difficult relationship (that can be a source of significant learning—an opportunity for vertical development). This segment might consist of five or six statements, with half of the statements being made by the protagonist (the coaching client) and the other half by the other person involved in this difficult relationship. The left column consists of the thoughts, feelings and assumptions that occur in the protagonist's reaction to each statement made by the other person.

Typically, these left column reactions have not been shared with the other person. Instead they remain unarticulated but highly influential in the mind, heart and gut of the protagonist. These left column elements are often directly related to the content of the lower two quadrants in our polarity map. Argyris and Schon suggest that the left column assumptions can be self-fulfilling. For instance, if I believe that the other person is being defensive and evasive, then my own suspicious about them and my own reticence to share my thoughts and feelings about them, are likely to increase (justifiably) their own increased suspicions about me (their own left column)

and thereby increase their evasive and defensive posture (setting in motion their own dynamic polarities)..

With some assistance and support in our own community of truth, we can identify and articulate our left column and identify ways in which these non-disclosed thoughts, feelings and assumptions can readily be self-fulfilling – further escalating the tension and miscommunication that is operating in this dysfunctional relationship. How do we find an appropriate way to share some of these thoughts, feelings and assumptions with the other person? How do we find a way to make this a growth opportunity for ourselves and perhaps the person with whom we are interacting?

It is quite common for negative feedback to be delivered by someone whom we don't fully trust (regarding either their intentions or their competence). At the very least, the delivery of negative feedback can itself create a contentious relationship if it induces the polarity dynamics that I have diagramed for myself. Thus, it is particularly important for each of us to turn for support to a coach, consultant, colleague—or ideally a community of truth--when accepting or even asking for negative feedback. The opportunity for development and life-long learning is there.

Conclusions

With a little assistance, we can be thoughtful, growth-seeking leaders who seize the opportunity to learn something significant about our self and about how we can best balance support and challenge in our work life (and even more generally in our personal life). The gift of significant learning often comes in strange packages. We are given the opportunity to unwrap and make constructive use of this gift. Hopefully, you and I can both avail ourselves of this opportunity in our personal and professional lives—perhaps finding truth within community.

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