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## Context to the nugget conversation

Ayelet speaks about how there is much more information in failures and in us mining the graveyards of failure than trying to overanalyse the factors behind success. Her assertion is that there is greater heterogeneity in failure that leads to richer information that could be helpful than the relative homogeneity of successes. She also goes on to speak about how we think about sharing positive and negative feedback with people.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): The other piece you talk about in the book that really caught my attention was about how we deal with negative information. At the outset, you say that two pieces of negative information often end up being more different than two pieces of positive information. As a result, we are probably more likely to get a meaningful juice from mining the silent graveyard of failure than the loud screams of success. Can you say more about where this comes from?

Ayelet Fishbach (AF): Well, the interesting part is that it is hard to learn from negative information, it is hard to learn from failure, and it is hard to learn from negative feedback despite the fact that it often has better information. Now you ask why negative information is often more informative, well, the reason is that it is often the case that there are fewer ways to succeed than the way to be wrong. And if there are more ways to be wrong, then one mistake will not be similar to another mistake. Let me illustrate this with an example. If you think about being appropriately friendly, an employee that is just say is the right level of friendly, he is not constantly talking in your face but is also not withdrawn. That person is very similar to another employee who is also friendly. Now let us take someone who is not friendly who has some issues with her social skills. Maybe she is withdrawn, she is very different than the employee who has the wrong social skills because she is very chatty, she is constantly needing of attention. And it can basically take any dimension of performance and say, well, there is often the right range, and if you are underperforming, it could be because you are doing too much or too little outside of this range. Other reasons why negative information is often more informative is that when people give you negative information, they are often more thoughtful. Negative feedback tends to come with an explanation, so if you ask me how am I doing and I feel well, I am just going to say, good, thank you. If I do not feel well, I am going to say, well, I do not feel very well today, and I will then explain why. Like you are not going to accept just, oh, I am not feeling well and me going away, you would like me to explain, you expect the elaboration, and I expect this for myself. And if you take these two things together, the idea that negative information is often more elaborated and that it is often the case that the ways to be successful are similar but the ways to fail are different, that would result in many situations in which negative feedback is more informative, failure has more information, not always, but many times.

DJ: That is very interesting Ayelet. If I may try and link it back with another conversation, I had with a gentleman called Professor Dan Cable at London Business School, he actually talks about the notion of a highlights package. He says, just like you have sports highlights, when you are trying to work on yourself, try and organize your own highlights, what were the different ways in which you touched people and the difference it made to them, and he says that can tell us a lot about who we are and what makes us distinctive, our super power, etc. It is interesting that as I hear you say, maybe the fact that we do not hear so much about what makes us special, it makes it worth the while for us to create a highlights package because otherwise nobody really talks about it, I think people also offer more negative information more easily to us, is that a good way of reconciling the two?

AF: I am not sure that there is more negative information out there. I like the advice to think about what you do well because you will often come up with more abstract variables than what you will hear in feedback. The feedback is often more concrete and more specific and to extract your values, to extract something such as I care about the people at work, or it is important for me that we adhere to certain values. This is often too abstract than what you hear when you get feedback, but it is not true that feedback tends to be negative. Actually when we look at it, feedback tends to be a positive and, in a way, empty. So positive in the sense that oh, Deepak, you are doing a great job, and you are really, you do not know what is great and what to do with that feedback.

DJ: Hmm. It is a great point. I think the abstractness of it makes it valuable given that the daily feedback is often more tactical and more concrete. So I think that point is well taken.

AF: Yeah, and often empty, the problem with feedback that it is often hard to extract valuable lessons, I would say that when I did the exercise of having people in my class, these are business students give feedback to each other, they are often very vague about the negative, about the points of improvement, so the other person is not really learning how they can improve, how they can do things differently. And the positive is kind of empty, more of oh, things are going very well, good, let us move on.

DJ: And talking about negative feedback, you make the distinction between whether we are talking about commitment or progress and depending on how we frame our feedback, people are likely to respond differently, can you say more in the nuance here about giving good developmental feedback?

AF: Yes, so the problem with negative feedback is that, well, actually, let me step back. There are a few problems with negative feedback, and one is that the person might not pay attention. So there is no learning whatsoever because I do not even remember the negative feedback that I received, I was not paying attention. The other problem is that I might pay too much attention and get to the wrong conclusion. I might conclude that I am not good at it, that I have no chance that I am unable. And as it turns out, the most productive way to use negative feedback is to think concretely about what needs to change, about how we can grow from the feedback. I make the distinction between commitment and progress, if you think about negative feedback, it is suggesting that I am committed, well, too bad for you Deepak, you are just uncommitted, you just cannot do this. If you take this negative feedback and think about it in terms of lack of progress, well, I can just work hard there, I can figure out how to do it right. Maybe it is about putting more work, maybe it is about doing things in a different way, it is really in the interpretation of the same feedback. Is it a sign that I need to try to do it in a different way or just harder, or is it a sign that it just not for me or that in the extreme cases that the world is just calling and there is absolutely nothing I can do about it, I am just going to be get negative feedback?

DJ: Hmm. And is there an example you could use to illustrate how we find the right language, and also how do we tailor it to whether somebody is committed to it versus somebody who is still unsure if it is the right activity for them?

AF: What we find is that it is best to give negative feedback to people who are already committed. You are not going to doubt their commitment as a result of the negative feedback. And there are a few approaches to do that. First, you can just give more negative feedback to those who are already the experts, those who are committed. And we find that people intuitively allow themselves to express constructive criticism towards those who they feel are secured, towards those who they feel are already sure about their commitment. We also find that more committed individuals or experts are more likely to seek out negative feedback. And really what I mean by negative feedback is seeking out information about how I can do it in a different way, what is less than ideal about the way that I am doing it so far. When people feel like novices, when people are novices, when they are not sure about their commitment, then negative feedback can really give them the wrong message, they can take it as a sign that they are unable. To give you an example of a study, we found that students in an advanced language class were more interested in an instructor that will tell them what they do wrong than students that were just starting to learn this language.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: One of the things I try and do in my work is ask people that choose to work with me why they picked me. I also try and ask the people that choose not to work with me for whatever reason. I notice that the latter often has insights which are in my blind spot and offer good food for reflection and potential correction. To build on what Ayelet says, even if we can mine our own graveyards – the pockets where we are less successful, we might find interesting things. Another application of this is that if we want to understand the culture of a company, we could ask the people who are culture carriers what they think. If you want real juicy information, you talk to the people who chose to leave the company for whatever reason and you end up picking up all kinds of insights when you do that!

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## End of nugget transcription

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## About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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