

Career Path: What I Learned from Judging and Being Judged

Career Development



Being judged can be painful, depending on how you are performing and how your reviewer delivers feedback. I've learned a lot about making good use of constructive criticism, which I'll share with you here.

I also realized that serving as a judge of others is not easy either, especially if you're interested in being fair, constructive, and honest. I recently helped judge the finalists for the 2022 ACC Top 10 30-Somethings. Although I've judged ACC competitions before, I found the process this year more challenging.

Any time I struggle with something, I figure I can find a lesson in there somewhere. Perhaps how to manage my own emotions to deal with a difficult situation. Often how to improve my own performance to avoid being in an awkward situation at all.

This article, and the next two articles, represent my attempt to tease out lessons from judging and being judged. When I say judging, I also mean the process of giving and receiving feedback more generally and not just formal judging. I hope you find something relevant and useful for your own development.

I'll get into the details on each point, but here are the main points I will cover:

- Which feedback is most valuable to you;

- Why perceived effort is a dangerous benchmark;
- Work is not the best place for your efforts;
- The two people you should compare yourself to;
- What extraordinary circumstances say about you;
- What caring deeply about an issue is worth; and
- Most of what you do is not unique.

Which feedback is most valuable to you

There are two kinds of feedback you should delight in receiving: Feedback that comes from people whose opinion you respect and trust, and feedback that is true regardless of the source.

The corollary to these rules is that you can apply a healthy skepticism to all other feedback you receive over your career. Just because someone is sitting in a position to judge you does not necessarily (1) make them better than you, (2) give them meaningful insights into your performance, or (3) mean they know how to give constructive feedback.

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A person whom you trust and respect, however, does you a great service when they give you feedback. Even when, perhaps especially when, they tell you things that are painful, and where you have fallen short in your performance.

This person is not trying to hurt you. Exactly the opposite. They care about you and are trying to help you get better. Treat this feedback like the gift it is, and thank them for it. Then think on it and turn it to your advantage. The best learnings I made over my career came from people who trusted me enough to tell me when I screwed something up.

What about people you don’t trust, whom you may suspect are trying to cause you pain or trouble? Here too, you can take advantage of the situation. You do so by knowing your own strengths and weaknesses and having a healthy dose of self-awareness and self-confidence. Ask yourself the following question: “Is what this person is saying true?”

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Even if their aim is to hurt you, by drawing attention to a real weakness, they have done you a service. And if you are confident what the person is saying is not true, you are well-positioned to dismiss the person and their criticism, preserving your peace of mind.

Why perceived effort is a dangerous benchmark

I have observed that we are each usually the heroes of our own stories. We know our intentions are

good, and we believe in the correctness of what we're doing. This is only sensible, and helps us get through hard times. But our natural human tendency can blind us to some objective truths.

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Sometimes we don't really put in enough effort to be successful in a project. We might be busy with other things, or not particularly motivated about this topic at this time. Or maybe we let emotions get the better of us. There are many reasons for not performing our best every now and then.

The thing is, work feels like work to us whether it is productive and on-task or whether we're wasting our time. Work also feels like work to us without regard to the result. That is, the hours you spend negotiating a contract that fails to come to fruition are still hours of your life you will never get back.

Perhaps most relevant, the amount of effort we feel like we're investing is subjective. What seems like a huge effort to us may be trivial to a colleague. Maybe you are not as experienced or skilled, such that the same task that they think nothing of completing seems herculean to you.

Just because you think you're working hard does not mean you are performing well objectively.

Next week, I'll pick up with why actually working hard is also no guarantee of success.

Be well.

James Bellerjeau



Lecturer

University of Zurich

James Bellerjeau is a lecturer in the LLM program of the University of Zürich and for the Europa Institut of the University of Zürich.

Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.