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## Putting a Positive Spin on Evaluations

Dear Communications Doctor,  
Last week I had my annual evaluation. Since then, I can't stop thinking about what was said. I know I do a good job here, but my mind keeps spinning with all the things my supervisor said need to be improved.

A.J. – Austin

Dear A.J. –

You are not alone. In fact, if you were to ask just about anyone who has just been evaluated what he or she remembers most, an honest response would be not the things that he or she is doing right. Rather, it is easiest to recall the supervisor's suggestions for improvement.

This has to do with the way our brain is wired. Everyday we are presented with millions of messages. The way that our perception works is that we select out the messages that are the most important to us. Think for a moment about how this relates to the evaluation process.

Prior to going into an evaluation, what is the typical person thinking? Not, *"I wonder what great things they are going to say about me this time."* Rather, you are more likely thinking *"I wonder what they are going to find wrong this time."* Because we set up our brain to look for this information, this will be what information we select out. Subsequently this is the information we will hold in long term memory, where it remains. And at a moments notice, we can replay the message like a broken record.

Communication experts refer to this as "sharpening." Sharpening happens when we pay attention to certain aspects of a message while ignoring or overlooking the other aspects of a message. Imagine you have a huge "mental highlighter" and at any given moment you take it out to mark or highlight the messages most important to you in *regard to learning the new computer system which represents an area that I'd like for you to continue to work on."*

For instance, where would you use your "mental highlighter" if your evaluator said, *"A.J., you've really had a great year. I appreciate how you've covered extra shifts for your colleagues who have called in sick. I also appreciate your willingness to take on extra projects. You have also come a long way with regard to learning the new computer system which represents an area that I'd like for you to continue to work on."*

The reality is - all of these messages are of equal importance. However, because of our tendency to sharpen on the negative or corrective messages we are more likely to be driving home later that evening saying to ourselves, *"I hate that computer system. I can't believe that they expect me with all of my other roles and responsibilities to learn that too."*

A good way to gauge whether you are sharpening on the negative or corrective aspects of a message is to play the game, "Get Off Your Buts." When we are being evaluated, chances are we not as interested in the messages that come before the "but." Rather, we are interested in the messages coming after.

Supervisor: *"You do a great job around here, BUT . . ."*

Supervisor: *"Overall we've seen great improvement, BUT . . ."*

To keep from sharpening, ask yourself, *"what just came before the BUT that needs my attention."*

As you know, an evaluator's purpose is to provide you with feedback. This is in hope that you will take this information and make positive changes in behavior. Equipped with the information that you learned from your evaluation, you are set to begin on a journey toward making these improvements. So, my best advice? Rather than letting your mind spin with all the things that your supervisor said that need to be improved, let your mind spin with all of the behavioral changes you can make so as to be the best employee you can be.

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*Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit [www.CommunicationsDoctor.com](http://www.CommunicationsDoctor.com).*