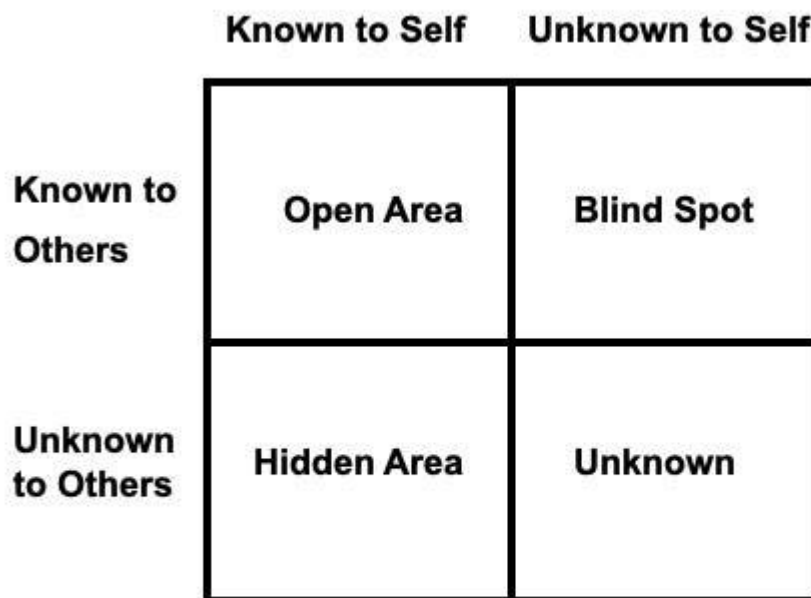


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By

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Feedback and Sponges



The Johari Window Model

From Critics and Cheerleaders to Coaches

When it comes to feedback, it's easy to fall into two extremes:

- **Critics** see your weaknesses and attack your worst self.
- **Cheerleaders** see your strengths and celebrate your best self.



Both roles can be helpful in small doses, but neither gets you very far. What you really need are **coaches**. A coach sees your **potential** and helps you become a better version of yourself.

Feedback vs Advice

I wanted to master the sermons, but I realized I needed a better filter. When you open yourself up to others, you can choose:

- To listen to critics,
- To seek out cheerleaders,
- Or to turn to coaches.

One way to do that is to shift from **asking for feedback** to **asking for advice**.

- Feedback tends to dwell on the past: *“Here’s what you did wrong last time.”*
- Advice points you to the future: *“Here’s what you could do better next time.”*

A simple change in wording — *“What’s one thing I can do better?”* — often elicits specific, constructive suggestions that move you forward.

The Character Skill of Sponginess

When people meet Melody Hobson, the first thing they notice is her sponginess. A decade ago, at a presentation for VIPs, she stood out immediately:

- She was the one asking the most questions.
- She was the one taking notes.
- She was the one absorbing everything.

This quality is called absorptive capacity: the ability to recognize, value, assimilate, and apply new information. It hinges on two habits:



1. How you acquire information
 - a. Do you merely react to what enters your field of vision?
 - b. Or do you proactively seek new knowledge, skills, and perspectives?
2. Why you filter information
 - a. Do you filter it to feed your ego?
 - b. Or do you filter it to fuel your growth?

Four Ways People Filter and Acquire Information

- **Reactive + Ego-Driven**
Learning short-circuits. People limit their input to what feels safe, rejecting anything that threatens their image. Their thin skin leaves them with thick skulls.
- **Proactive + Ego-Driven**
People collect information actively but selectively. If feedback is uncomfortable, they block it out. They become like Teflon — nothing sticks.
- **Reactive + Growth-Oriented**
People accept feedback humbly and internalize criticism. They're praised as coachable or teachable. But they rarely go looking for knowledge beyond what others offer. Their growth depends on being shaped by someone else.
- **Proactive + Growth-Oriented**
This is the sweet spot. These are the true sponges. They consistently seek out new knowledge, embrace discomfort, and adapt quickly. Their character skill makes them resilient and innovative, especially when the odds are stacked against them.

Melody Hobson: A Human Sponge

As the youngest of six children to a single mother in Chicago, **Melody Hobson** grew up with hardship all around her. Her mother often couldn't pay the bills. Baths sometimes required heating



water on a hot plate. Melody frequently came home from school to find the **electricity cut off** and the **phones disconnected**. At times, the family's car was repossessed, and they were forced to move after being evicted.

From the very beginning, Melody lagged behind her peers. In first grade, she struggled to concentrate and adapt — and she didn't know how to read. She was placed in a remedial class. By every measure, the odds were stacked against her.

But Melody had set her heart on attending an **Ivy League university**. And slowly, she began to absorb and adapt.

Her determination showed up early. When her elementary school bus was involved in an accident, while her classmates waited to be picked up, Melody simply **walked to school**. By high school, she was earning straight A's, serving on the Student Council Executive Board, editing the yearbook's Spirit page, volunteering as treasurer and vice president of the Substance Abuse Prevention Club, and tutoring elementary students. She wasn't just working hard — she was **soaking up every opportunity**.

Today, Melody Hobson is the **co-CEO of Ariel Investments**, one of the most successful investment firms in America. She chairs the board of **Starbucks**. She has been named one of **Time's 100 Most Influential People**. She not only got into **Princeton**, but she will soon become the **first Black person to have a residential college named after her there**.

If you ask how Melody beat the odds, most people will point to her **legendary work ethic**. And yes — she worked relentlessly. But look deeper, and you see something more.

A century ago, we might have called her a **human sponge**.

- She absorbed knowledge, even when she started behind.
- She adapted to every challenge, no matter how harsh.
- She filtered hardship into resilience, and setbacks into fuel.



Her rise is more than a **rags-to-riches** story. It is a testament to the power of capacity: the ability to **absorb, adapt, and grow**.

Why Sponginess Matters

Work ethic can carry you far. But sponginess multiplies your potential. It's not just about working harder. It's about:

- Taking initiative to expand yourself.
- Embracing feedback instead of dodging it.
- Filtering information for growth, not ego.

In the end, sponginess is what makes people adaptable, resilient, and ultimately, capable of turning obstacles into opportunities.

A Lesson from Melody Hobson

When Melody Hobson was applying to college, she was thrilled to be admitted to both **Harvard** and **Princeton**. Princeton invited her to a breakfast with powerful alumni, where she was seated next to NBA star turned senator **Bill Bradley**.

Melody peppered him with questions, and he was so impressed by her curiosity that he began mentoring her. One day, he told her she had a tendency to dominate the room — and if she wasn't careful, she would come across as a ball hog. Melody felt tears welling up.

But she didn't dismiss the criticism. She took it seriously. Taking criticism personally doesn't mean you're weak. It means you care. The danger isn't in feeling the sting; it's in letting your ego get in the way of learning.

Filtering Feedback: Who Should You Trust?

Being a sponge means knowing what to absorb and what to filter. Not every voice deserves equal weight. The most trustworthy coaches combine three qualities:



1. **Care** — They want the best for me.
 2. **Credibility** — They have relevant expertise.
 3. **Consistency** — They know me well.
- Care + credibility without consistency may not apply to my life.
 - Care + consistency without credibility may steer me wrong.
 - Credibility + consistency without care may not have my best interests in mind.
 - But when all three align, the input is **gold dust**.

Champions Are Deaf

Melody once made a resolution: “*Champions are deaf.*” Not deaf to advice, but deaf to the noise of destructive criticism. She went out of her way to show interest in others, to ask questions, to keep learning.

Even athletes adopt this mindset. **Luke Donald**, after the recent Ryder Cup victory, shared how much he learned from **Owen Farrell**, England’s rugby kicker, who faced relentless criticism yet had to remain calm under pressure.

Sponginess as a Pro-Social Skill

The big takeaway is clear: **sponginess is not just a proactive skill — it’s a pro-social skill.**

It’s not only about soaking up nutrients that help you grow.

It’s about **releasing nutrients that help others grow.**

Growing fruit on other people trees.

Other models of Feedback and Coaching



Imagine a chart with two axes. Across the bottom, the horizontal axis is about specificity. On the left, we have *non-specific* feedback, and on the right, *specific* feedback.

Then, the vertical axis is about purpose. At the top is *motivational feedback* — what went well. At the bottom is *developmental feedback* — what could be better.

That gives us four quadrants, and each one can be represented by a suit of playing cards.

♥ Hearts – Non-specific and Motivational

This is the *cheerleading* quadrant. It sounds like:

- “Great job!”
- “That was amazing!”

It's nice to hear, but it's vague. It boosts morale in the short-term, but it doesn't give you anything concrete to build on. Hearts are fine as encouragement, but they shouldn't be the only kind of feedback we give.

♣ Clubs – Non-specific and Developmental

This is the most damaging quadrant. It sounds like:

- “That wasn't good enough.”
- “Your attitude needs to improve.”

This kind of feedback feels personal. It's unhelpful because it offers no clear path forward. It's like hitting someone with a club — it hurts, but it doesn't help. We should avoid clubs altogether.

♠ Spades – Specific and Developmental

This is the *digging* quadrant. A spade is used to dig, and this feedback digs down to the root cause. It sounds like:



- “When you did X, the impact was Y. Next time, try Z.”

Spade feedback is clear, actionable, and focused on behaviors, not personality. It's the most effective way to help someone grow.

◆ **Diamonds – Specific and Motivational**

Finally, the diamond quadrant. Everyone loves diamonds — they're valuable and clear. This feedback sounds like:

- “What I loved about X was Y. Let's build on it by trying Z.”

It's encouraging *and* instructive. It shows you thought carefully about what the person did, and it gives them a direction to grow.

- **Avoid the Clubs — they hurt and don't help.**
- **Use Spades to help people improve.**
- **And use Hearts for morale boosts, but don't stop there.**
- **Use Diamonds to encourage people while guiding their growth**