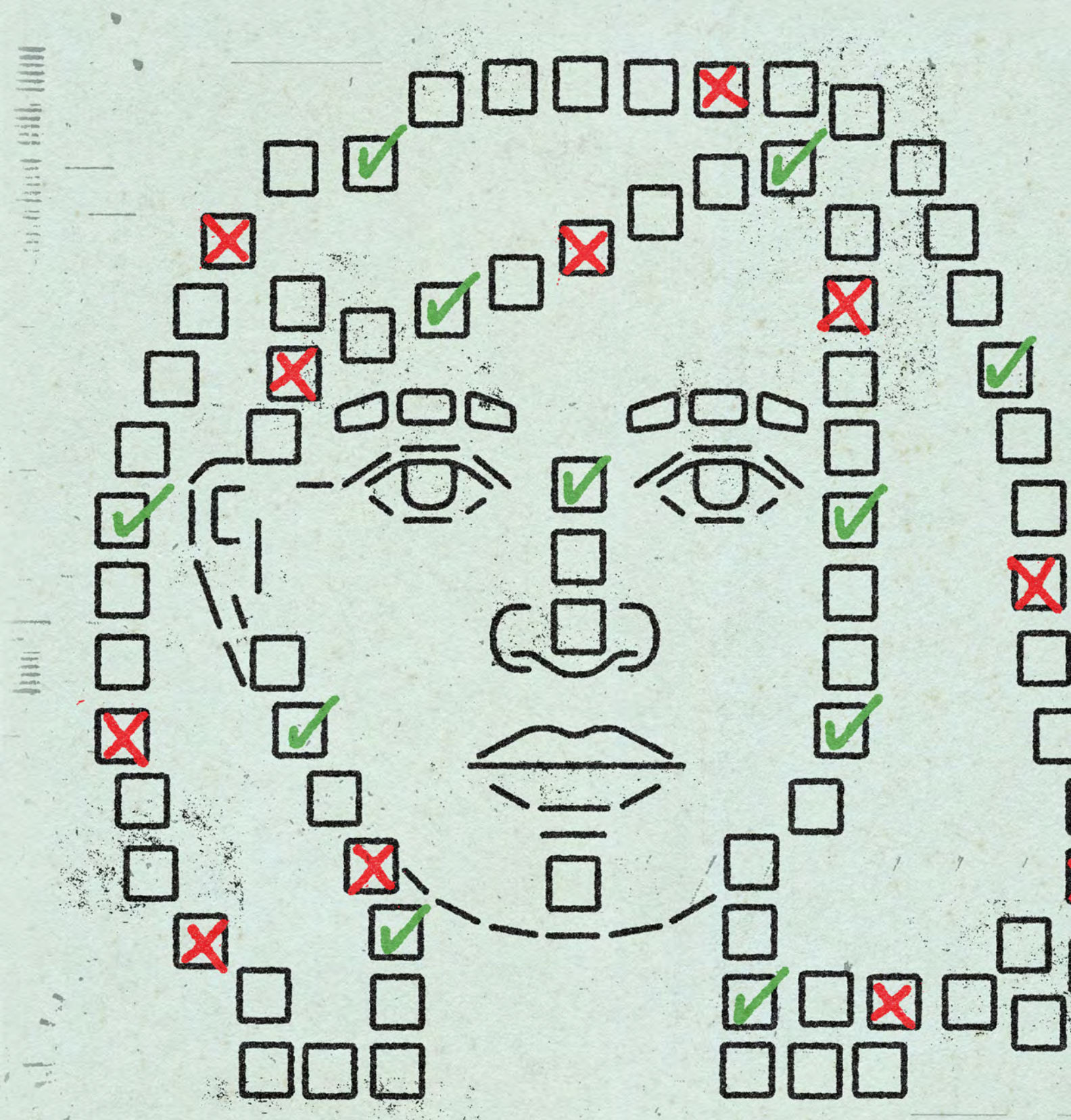
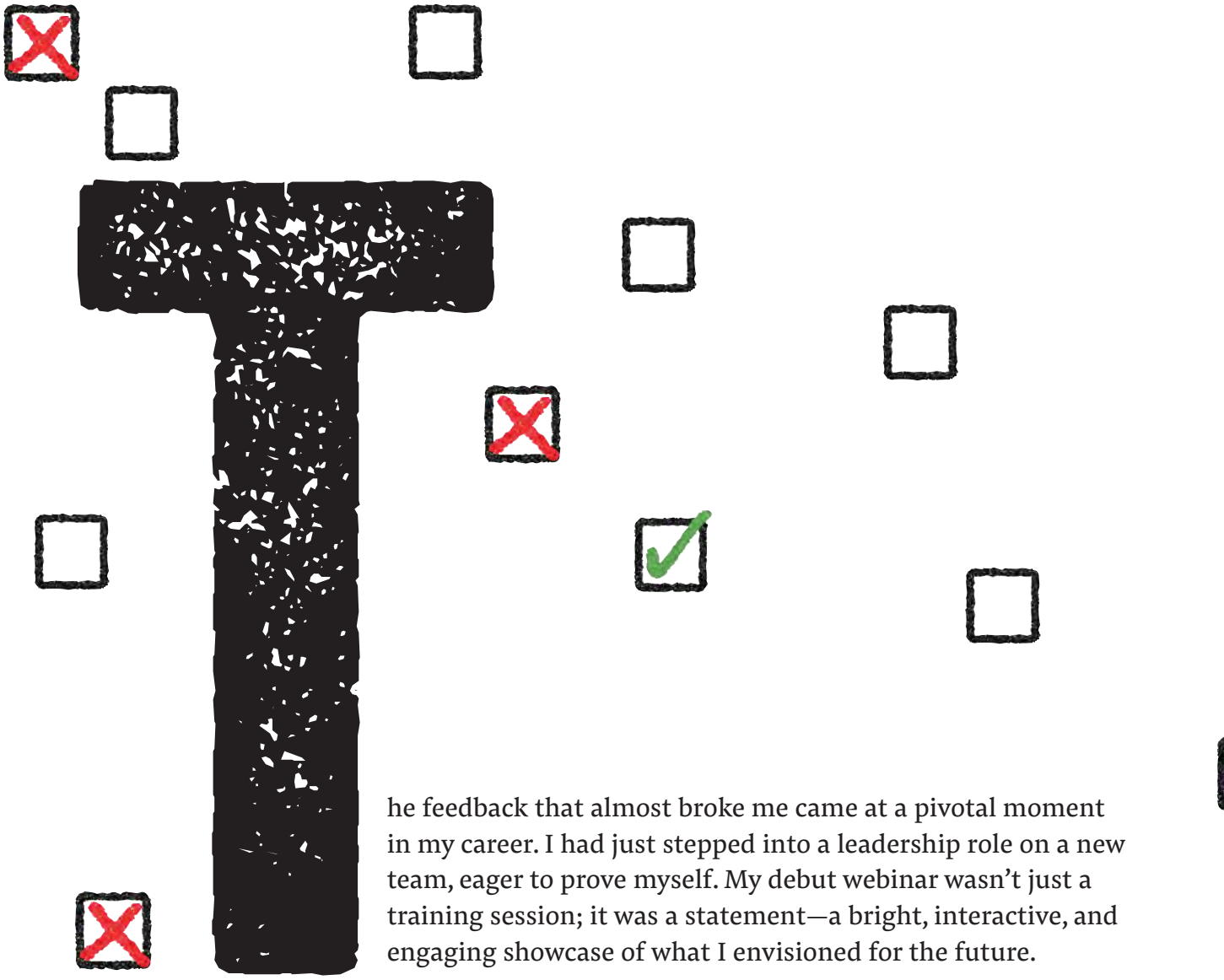


The Gift and Burden of Feedback

How should training facilitators determine which postsession feedback will help them grow and which will hold them back?

BY KASSY LABORIE

ILLUSTRATION | RICHARD MIA



The feedback that almost broke me came at a pivotal moment in my career. I had just stepped into a leadership role on a new team, eager to prove myself. My debut webinar wasn't just a training session; it was a statement—a bright, interactive, and engaging showcase of what I envisioned for the future.

Then, the feedback came.

A senior leader, a long-established voice in the company, dismissed it with two gut-punching words: *Romper Room*. The 1950s children's TV show.

In an instant, that senior leader had reduced my work—an innovative approach that I carefully crafted—to something silly and juvenile. My stomach dropped. My mind raced. Had I miscalculated? Was I out of sync with the organization's culture? Was that a legitimate critique, something I needed to adjust, or was it simply one person's resistance to change?

That situation could have sent me retreating, second-guessing every creative instinct I had. And for a while, it did. I started questioning my choices, wondering whether I needed to blend in rather than stand out. But then I asked myself: Do I believe in what I'm doing? Is that feedback a call to refine my work or an invitation to shrink?

That was the moment I realized not all feedback deserves equal weight. Some input helps us grow. Some renders us stuck. The real challenge isn't just receiving feedback but knowing what to do with it.

A double-edged sword

As trainers, speakers, and facilitators, we put so much of ourselves into our work. Our voice, energy, expertise, and personality are on display. But beyond that, many of us don't just teach; we speak and train because we believe in something. We want to make an impact, challenge perspectives, or ignite change.

That's why feedback can come off as personal—it can feel like a judgment of who we are rather than just what we did. But what if that's not what's happening?

Roy Rapoport, in his *Medium* article titled "Why Feedback Hurts," offers a powerful analogy of people as web servers. "You're running some code in your head. That code is your values, your beliefs, your feelings, your identity. Other people, though, don't get to see the code in your head," he writes. "All they get to see is the HTTP transactions they have with you. And that's the only thing about which they can give you feedback."

In other words, when an audience member gives input, they're not evaluating who we are as a speaker, trainer, or facilitator. They're reacting to how we

showed up and how our words, tone, or delivery landed in that specific moment.

That perspective shift is critical for trainers and speakers because our work is so personal, yet, paradoxically, the comments we receive are never about us. They're about how the audience experienced what we delivered.

Common pitfalls when processing feedback

It's ironic that I'm writing this article because, for years, I struggled with processing feedback. And if I'm being honest, I still often do.

I feel things deeply and care a lot about my work, so when I first started receiving audience evaluations, I did what many trainers and speakers do: I tried to act on everything—every nitpicky comment and vague or apathetic response. I became obsessed with tweaking my presentations to please everyone (which, spoiler alert, is impossible).

Then, when that became overwhelming, I swung the other way: I started ignoring most of the comments entirely, telling myself, "I know what I'm doing. I don't need this." In doing so, however, I risked missing out on valuable insights that could help me grow.

The biggest pitfall of all is that I took every critical comment personally, as if it were a direct attack on my worth as a speaker, trainer, and human being. It got so bad that my husband had to step in. He developed a system: After a conference, he collects all the written evaluations, and I am not allowed to read them for two weeks.

Why? Because unstructured feedback, the kind you gather through open-ended, post-training surveys, can be a mess. There's no guiding framework for what people should comment on, so it becomes a free-for-all. For instance, instead of focused feedback on my message and delivery, I may get reactions such as "The room was too cold" or "Would've been better if there were donuts."

Without structure, feedback can be scattered, personal, or irrelevant, so when I read it too soon, I can't separate helpful insights from noise. Instead, I fixate on the most negative remark, letting it overshadow everything else.

Not All Feedback Deserves a Front-Row Seat

For too long, I let feedback control me. I absorbed it all—the helpful, the harsh, and the irrelevant. I treated every opinion as equally valid.

That changed when I studied with Michael and Amy Port at Heroic Public Speaking. They taught me an approach to filtering feedback, based on the Red Velvet Rope Policy from their guide, *Book Yourself Solid.* The original concept is about choosing who gets access to your time and energy, but I learned how to apply it to feedback.

Instead of letting all feedback in, I could decide who gets past the velvet rope, allowing in input that serves my growth and leaving out the noise.

Become proactive rather than reactive

Not all feedback is helpful, so invite trusted voices. I now seek out input from mentors, peers, and expert reviewers, people who understand my work and my goals. Those are the voices that challenge me in ways that make me better.

Ask targeted questions. Instead of a vague "How did I do?," I ask:

- "In what ways did my main message land—or not?"
- "What one thing could I tweak to make this stronger?"

Clearer questions result in more useful feedback.

Set boundaries for unstructured feedback

Graciously decline input you didn't ask for. If someone offers unsolicited advice that doesn't align with my goals, I acknowledge it without feeling obligated to act on it:

- "I hear you. Right now, I'm focused on [specific goal]."
- "I'm taking a different approach with this, but I appreciate your perspective."
- "I'll keep that in mind."

Use feedback only when you're ready to absorb it. Unstructured comments can be messy, unfocused, or overly personal. I now wait, sometimes a week or more, before reading critiques. When I come back to it, I'm less emotional and more analytical.

Filtering feedback is a practice, not a one-time shift

At first, filtering feedback felt unnatural. Wasn't I supposed to take it all in? But as I practiced it, I saw the difference:

- No more wasted energy on scattered, irrelevant feedback
- More useful insights from people who help me grow
- Confidence in knowing I control how and when I receive feedback

Managing feedback isn't about avoiding it; it's about being intentional. Real growth happens when I get the right feedback, at the right time, from the right people.

But after two weeks, I have distance. I can approach the comments as data, not a personal attack. I can ask:

- Is this feedback about me, or is it about something out of my control?
- Is this an outlier or a pattern worth paying attention to?
- Does this feedback align with what I value as a speaker?

A three-part framework for unpacking feedback

Feedback is valuable, but only if we process it wisely. If you act on everything, you lose your authenticity. If you ignore everything, you stop evolving. And if you take everything to heart, you risk crushing your own confidence.

We can honor audience input while protecting our confidence by shifting from self-judgment to self-awareness. Instead of internalizing feedback as a verdict on your worth, take a debugging approach: What was the audience's expectation? What was the actual experience? Is there something I can adjust to improve that experience next time?

Such a mindset will enable you to stay open to learning without spiraling into self-doubt. It also helps you filter feedback; some input is useful for growth, some is simply a reflection of audience preference, and some you can let go.

Not every piece of feedback requires action, but every piece is information. Using that information wisely makes you better at what you do. Kevin D. Wilde's insights in *Coachability* shifted my entire perspective on feedback: It's not something to endure; it's something to embrace. The most coachable leaders don't just tolerate feedback; they actively create the conditions to receive it well.

What to act on. How do you know feedback is actionable?

- It aligns with your goals and expertise.
- It comes from a trusted, qualified source (for example, industry peers, mentors, or target audience members).
- It's specific and tangible ("Your pacing was too fast in the first half" versus "I didn't like it").

To spot feedback worthy of action:

- Look for patterns. If multiple people highlight the same issue, it merits attention.
- Use postsession surveys or trusted rehearsal groups to gather structured insights.

Feedback That Saves Lives: Lessons From 911 Dispatchers

For many people, feedback can feel uncomfortable. A critical email, a tense performance review, or an unexpected note from a colleague can sting. But imagine receiving feedback when lives are on the line.

That's the reality for dispatchers for 911, the phone number for police, fire, or medical emergencies. Those telecommunicators must not only stay calm in crisis but also absorb, process, and apply feedback in a high-stakes environment where every decision matters.

I spoke with Susi Marsan, an emergency dispatch instructor, about what it takes to accept feedback under extreme pressure.

For telecommunicators, Marsan says that feedback is constant and vital. There's a recording of every call, and supervisors analyze and debrief all of them. They do so not because anyone is trying to nitpick telecommunicators' work, but because lives depend on getting it right. So how do they handle it?

Train for it. From day one, telecommunicators learn that feedback is not about judgment; it's about getting better. The faster they learn to absorb and apply it, the more effective they become.

Learn to filter feedback fast. In an environment where every second counts, not all feedback is equally urgent. They develop the ability to quickly determine what's actionable and critical versus what they can review later.

Separate emotion from evaluation. In life-and-death situations, there's no room for ego. Telecommunicators learn to take in even the harshest feedback without letting it shake their confidence, because their ability to stay focused can change an outcome.

Most people will never answer a 911 call but will face moments where feedback challenges them, where they must decide: Will this make me better, or will I let it break me?

The best 911 telecommunicators don't fear feedback; they leverage it. They use it to sharpen their skills, refine their instincts, and show up better every day.

What if the rest of us did the same?

When facilitating train-the-trainer programs, I ask participants to create materials based on their own content. Feedback revealed that they wanted two teach-backs—the first one using my materials as an example, and then a second round where participants create their own. That simple change gave learners a clear model for success and significantly improved their learning experience.

What to reflect on. How do you know feedback is worth reflection?

- It doesn't require an immediate change but sparks curiosity.
- It's subjective, yet could offer long-term insights (for example, "You giggled too much" or "Your slides were visually overwhelming").

To approach reflective feedback:

- Keep a feedback journal to revisit over time.
- Test changes in low-risk settings before making major adjustments.
- Rehearse in front of trusted peers to see whether patterns emerge.

At first, I dismissed comments that I giggled too much because, honestly, it hurt. But later, I got curious: Was there a pattern? It turns out that I had a specific nervous laugh of which I was not aware. By recognizing it, I was able to adjust, not by suppressing my joy, but by making sure my laughter was intentional and natural rather than a nervous habit.

What to let go. How do you know feedback isn't worth your energy?

- It's vague or unconstructive ("I didn't like the program").
- It contradicts your authentic style or expertise.
- It comes from someone unqualified to give it.

To develop resilience against unhelpful feedback:

- Shift your mindset. Feedback is data, not a personal attack.
- Create boundaries. Use structured forms rather than requesting offhand comments.
- Give yourself permission to let go.

Sometimes, letting go is the best liberation. After one session, someone commented that the architectural beams in the room obstructed attendees' view of the presenter. I had already adjusted my delivery to accommodate the space. At that point, I had to recognize I did everything I could, and sometimes that's enough.

Take ownership of feedback

Evaluations are part of the process, but the input doesn't have to define you. By choosing what to act on, reflect on, and let go, you can shape your growth in a way that aligns with your purpose.

Our brains don't always play fair, though. Enter confirmation bias, the mental shortcut that convinces us we're right even when we're not. It's why we instinctively seek out and believe feedback that aligns with our existing beliefs while downplaying or outright dismissing anything that challenges them.

Instead of internalizing feedback as a verdict on your worth, take a debugging approach.

If you think you're an amazing facilitator, you may zero in on the praise while brushing past constructive critiques. If you doubt yourself, even great feedback may feel like people are simply being nice. Either way, you're not seeing the full picture—you're seeing your version of it. That means valuable insights could be slipping through the cracks because your brain is wired to protect your current beliefs.

Instead of getting stuck in what feels true, take a step back and ask: What's truly useful?

Don't let feedback overwhelm you; let it empower you. Create a strategy that works for your goals, not just your inner critic. Keep learning, practicing, and showing up. The more you do, the stronger you'll get—not only at handling feedback but at using it to fuel real growth.

Looking back, I now realize that the *Romper Room* reference wasn't an attack; it was a signal that my approach was different from the norm. And different isn't bad. It's just not for everyone. By filtering feedback wisely, I didn't shrink—I flourished.

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