Ways to Make the Most of a Negative Job Review
By TODDI GUTNER

News of the worst unemployment numbers in 16 years is enough to create plenty of job jitters for most workers. But, with performance-review season in full swing, some people are bound to hear negative comments. In a tough economy, a bad review can seem insurmountable. But you can recover if you are "willing to self-assess and be open-minded to what is being told" to you, says Barbara Mohl, president of HRConnected, a human resources consulting firm. Here's how to bounce back:

Be open to feedback. The review is a communication tool for you and your manager to begin the conversation about your performance. You should be ready and willing to accept feedback. Remember, what you hear is usually meant to help you do your job better. "Realize that this process is called a performance review, not a performance correction," says John Heins, senior vice president and chief human resources officer at staffing firm Spherion Corp. The review isn't the time to debate and resolve the problems. "That conversation is best-suited for a follow-up meeting," says Mr. Heins.

Acknowledge your manager's comments. Giving negative feedback can be stressful for a manager. Listen to and acknowledge what your manager is saying, regardless of whether you agree with the comments. "The worst thing you can do is to make excuses or put the blame on someone else," says Beth Carvin, CEO and president of Nobscot, a retention management consulting firm in Honolulu. After you have heard your manager's comments and you understand what has been said, you can say "I appreciate your feedback and I understand the issues you have addressed." If you feel strongly and have proof that the assessment is unfair, then you can say "Thank you for your feedback, but I don't necessarily agree with X and I look forward to scheduling a follow-up meeting to discuss your points more specifically." Schedule that meeting before you leave the review.

Create an action plan. Take time to reflect and review your manager's comments. You might want to discuss difficult issues with a mentor or friend. Then create an action plan that you can cover and add to in the follow-up meeting. If you don't agree with your boss on all points, give specific examples of where you think your manager is wrong. Keep in mind, though, you'll need to be proactive about how to turn things around -- regardless of whether you agree. "Plan with your manager exactly what he or she would like you to improve," says Mr. Heins. Does something have to be done quicker or faster, or do you have to interact better with your colleagues? Ask if there might be a colleague who can mentor you and inquire about resources you can use to improve, recommends Ms. Mohl.

Schedule periodic follow-up meetings. Stay on top of the turnaround plan. "Many employees don't take the time or initiative to check in with their supervisor to see how they're doing," says Ms. Carvin. Don't be afraid to toot your own horn, she says, and let your boss know what you're accomplishing. Check in at least every two to three weeks, or sooner if you've achieved a success at work.