

Principles of Constructive Feedback

Feedback is a way of learning more about ourselves and the effect our behaviour has on others. Constructive feedback increases self-awareness, offers guidance and encourages development, so it is important to learn both to give it and to receive it. Constructive feedback does not mean only giving positive feedback (praise). Negative, or critical feedback given skilfully can be very important and useful. Destructive feedback, negative feedback given in an unskilled way generally leaves the recipient simply feeling bad with seemingly nothing on which to build and no useful information to use for learning.

There are some general principles of giving feedback, which, if followed will help you achieve a positive outcome.

1. Start with the positive

Most people need encouragement, to be told when they are doing something well. When offering feedback it can really help the receiver to hear first what they have done well. It is often common for individuals to emphasise the negative therefore the focus is likely to be on mistakes more often than successes. In a rush to criticise, we may overlook the things we liked. If the positive is registered first, any negative is more likely to be listened to and acted upon.

2. Be specific

Try to avoid general comments which are not useful when it comes to developing skills. Statements such as "you were brilliant!" or "it was awful" may be pleasant or dreadful to hear, but they don't give enough detail to be useful sources of learning. Try to pin-point what the person did that led you to use the label of "brilliant" or "awful" e.g. "the way you asked that question just at that moment was really helpful and enabled us to resolve that issue more quickly" or by responding in that way you seemed to be wanting to impose your opinions on the rest of the team". Specific feedback gives more opportunity for learning.

3. Refer to behaviour that can be changed

It is not likely to be helpful to give a person feedback about something over which they have no choice or control, in fact, it may be frustrating and even de-motivating.

4. Seek/offer alternatives

If you do give negative feedback then try to turn it into a learning opportunity by asking the person what they could have done differently, or, would do differently next time. It is always more powerful to get ideas coming from the person receiving feedback, but if they are struggling to think what they could have done differently then offer some suggestions.

5. Be descriptive rather than evaluative

This is expanding on 'be specific' describing what you saw or heard and/or the effect it had on you is much more powerful than just giving a judgment i.e. "the way you kept calm, quiet and focused during that situation helped everyone cope" rather than "you handled that situation well".

6. Own the feedback

It can be easy to say to the other person "You are...." suggesting that you are offering a universally agreed opinion about the person rather than just an individual one. It is important that we take responsibility for the feedback we offer. Begin with "I think...." or "I feel that" to avoid being the giver of a general opinion which you don't own.

7. Leaving the recipient with a choice

Feedback which demands change or is imposed heavily on the other person may invite resistance, and, is not consistent with a belief in each of us being personally autonomous. Skilled feedback offers people information about themselves which leaves them with a choice about whether to act or how to act. It can help to examine the consequences of any decision to change or not to change, but does not involve prescribing change.

Giving Difficult Feedback

Difficult conversations are a fact of our working life and how managers/reviewers handle these interactions make a discernable difference in productivity and morale.

When we have to tell people something that we know they might find difficult or painful to hear we may have a number of concerns:

1. Will they get very upset, and if so how will I deal with that

We often avoid telling people unpleasant things because it can sometimes make us feel bad when we do it, or sometimes we find it uncomfortable to have to cope with another's distress or anger. An essential question to ask ourselves in this situation is: "Do I have a responsibility to give feedback and help people reach their full potential?"

Failure to give people difficult feedback can result in:

- People failing to reach their full potential
- No change in the person's behaviour because they don't know that its causing a problem
- Continuation of normal ways of working without recognising improvements that could help them progress and develop
- An 'out of proportion' confrontation in the future as things build up and then 'blow'
- Problems in our continuing working relationship with the person which naturally develops when we are aware of something and they are not, or, when we are trying to keep something from them

Giving them feedback gives them the opportunity to change and develop.

2. Will it affect the relationship we have with that person in any lasting way?

The short answer is it might. This is always a risk, but we can minimise the risk by:

- Having a good relationship to begin with
- Giving feedback in a professional and skilled way

Neither of these are magical or mystical - relationships are good because people work at them and feedback can be constructive if we follow the previous guidelines.

3. Will they really hear what is said or will they distort it?

One good way to see if the person has accurately got the message is to ask them to paraphrase their understanding of the conversation and give them the opportunity to comment on what has been said.

4. Will it really have any effect on how they behave?

This depends firstly on whether they accept the feedback or not. In the end, people make their own decision as to whether or not to accept the feedback given. If they fail to act on the feedback given it may eventually be required to spell out the consequences of what may happen if their behaviour doesn't change. This may take a series of meetings to ensure appropriate opportunity is given to the member of staff to reflect and respond appropriately.

Sometimes a person accepts the feedback, but then goes away and does nothing to change their behaviour. This usually happens if they have left the session without clear objectives to which they have committed, taken any personal responsibility for the required change, or have no action plan to enable the changes to be implemented.

Giving feedback is not an end in itself... It's the beginning of a new agreement between two people.

It is therefore important to develop objective linked to any agreed change that can be followed up at a later date.

DESC model

A simple model to help in difficult conversations:

D*escribe* factually the situation as you see it

E*xpress* your feelings about the situation

S*ay* what you would like to happen, or want to happen (if possible offering alternatives)

C*onsequence* (optional) say gently what the possible consequences of not getting what you want might be

It is important to stick to the sequence.....

If the person receiving the feedback interrupts, or moves onto another subject, bring the conversation back and repeat what you said with only slight variation and no additions (known as the broken record technique) until you are sure the message has been received.

Different Perspectives

What is this?

This is a useful technique for reviewing or preparing for any type of interaction. You look at the proposed interaction from three different standpoints in order to enrich your appreciation of what might be involved.

Why use this technique?

- Improves your understanding of other people
- Enables you to think more flexibly and creatively
- Provides an opportunity to stand back and consider issues objectively
- Helps you appreciate the influence of your verbal and non-verbal behaviour on others, and the influence of their behaviours on you

How to use Different Perspectives

Mentally go through the scenario:

From your own viewpoint: consider your own needs, objectives, thoughts and feelings. How do you feel? Are your needs and objectives being met?

From that of the other person(s): 'Step into their shoes'. See, hear and feel the situation from this perspective. Evaluate the other person's likely needs, objectives and views.

From the viewpoint of an onlooker: Imagine the situation from the viewpoint of a dispassionate onlooker, detached from your own and from the other person's viewpoints. Observe the interpersonal dynamics - especially the impact on each party of the nonverbal behaviour.

Ways to apply Different Perspectives

- Previewing a meeting - to get a sense of how the other person is likely to approach and handle the meeting.
- During a meeting, especially when things are not going well, to get clues as to how you might need to change your approach (this needs some practice - leave until you have developed skills in previewing and reviewing).
- Reviewing a meeting to learn how to deal with that person more effectively, to better understand people in general, and to apply the 'kaizen' approach of continuous small improvements - developing your skills 'bit by bit'. Reviewing is especially useful if the meeting didn't go according to your plan - so that you can learn from setbacks.

How do you receive feedback?

Positive tips....

1. Listen to the feedback rather than immediately rejecting or arguing with it

Feedback can be uncomfortable to hear, but we may be the poorer without it. People may think things without telling us and then we would be at a definite disadvantage. Remember that people do have their opinions about you and will have their perceptions of your performance, and it can help you to be aware of these. However, also remember that you are entitled to your opinion and you may choose to ignore the feedback as being of little significance, irrelevant, or referring to behaviour which for some reason you wish to maintain - as long as you accept that there may be consequences to ignoring the feedback.

2. Be clear about what is being said

Avoid jumping to conclusions or becoming immediately defensive. If you do, people may cut down their feedback and you won't get the full benefit. Make sure you understand the feedback before you respond to it. A useful technique can be to paraphrase or repeat the criticism to check that you have understood.

3. Check the feedback out with others rather than relying on one source

If we rely on one source then we may imagine that the individual's opinion is shared by everybody. In fact, if we check it out with others we may find that others experience us differently and we will have a more balanced view of ourselves which can keep the feedback in proportion.

4. Ask for the feedback you don't want to get

Feedback can be so important that we may have to ask for it if it does not occur naturally. Sometimes we do get feedback, but it is restricted to one aspect of our behaviour and we may have to request feedback we would find useful, but do not get.

5. Decide what you will do as a result of the feedback

"It takes two to know one". Each of us needs to know how other people experience us to extend our self awareness, which is incomplete if merely our own version of ourselves, we can use the feedback to help our development. When we receive it, we can assess its value, the consequences of ignoring it or using it, and finally decide what we will do as a result of it. If we do not take decisions on the basis of it then it is wasted.

In the final analysis, it is always your choice whether to accept or reject the feedback.

Finally, thank the person for giving the feedback. We might benefit from it. It may not have been easy for the person to give, but it is a valuable practice to reinforce in any organisation or relationship.