

Giving Feedback

Everyone needs feedback from others to know how their own behavior is perceived by others and how the behavior may be having an impact upon them. Without such information we can only guess how others perceive what we do and how what we do may be affecting them!

In organizations every employee needs feedback about whether he or she is meeting the expectations of those who pay them for their work. In families each member of the family needs feedback about how his or her behavior is benefitting the family or creating problems and stress for others in the family. Learners need feedback from their teachers, coaches or mentors to help assure that they are learning.

Giving feedback is an essential component of successful relationships but few people learn how to give feedback skillfully. This brief article provides some guidelines and examples to help you learn to give feedback to others that will benefit them, help them learn and assure the success of your relationship with them.

Following are some basic guidelines to keep in mind when preparing to give feedback (either positive or negative).

When giving feedback to another person be sure to talk about behavior rather than the person! The objective is to help the person understand that you are not evaluating their worth or acceptability but that you are providing information about specific behavior.

When describing the behavior it is important to describe what you have observed. If someone else has told you about this behavior but you have not seen it yourself, you may find yourself being drawn into a messy conflict situation. It is also very important that even if you have observed behavior that you do not interpret the behavior or make assumptions about the reasons for the behavior.

For example, you may observe an employee sitting at a desk with arms folded on the desktop and her head resting on her arms. It would be easy to infer that she is feeling bad or taking a nap. Either interpretation might be correct but could easily be incorrect. It is also possible that she is thinking about a problem and considering solutions and has assumed this position to reduce distractions. The safest approach is to make no assumptions and simply describe what you have observed. "Grace, I noticed earlier that you were sitting at your desk with your head resting on your arms for quite some time. Are you okay?" She not only will respond with a Yes or No answer, she probably will provide some information and she likely will get the message that you care!

Focus your feedback on a description of the behavior rather than your judgment of it. May people have grown up hearing that they were being bad and that they were thoughtless, ungrateful, difficult, etc. instead of hearing that their behavior was unwanted by their parent. Giving a factual description of observed behavior is much less likely to be heard as a condemnation of the person and much more likely to help the person understand that a specific behavior needs to be changed. This is equally important when giving positive feedback! If you say "Good job!" the person probably will be pleased that you approve but they

learned nothing about what specific behavior made a positive impression and your feedback is less likely to reinforce the behavior that you would like to see again!

Consider the time and place when giving feedback to others. Giving negative feedback about someone's behavior in the presence of others is not a good idea because it adds an element of public shame and can result in others teasing the recipient or adding blameful or judgmental remarks of their own. Some people prefer to receive positive feedback privately rather than in the presence of others.

Telling an employee on Friday afternoon that you want them to meet with you Monday morning because you have some things you want to discuss with them can ruin their whole weekend! Choosing to give someone feedback when they are under a lot of stress because of workload or deadline pressure reduces the probability of the feedback having a positive result.

Managers often choose their own office as the place to give performance feedback to an employee. How does the employee feel being asked to meet with the boss in his/her office? Often, they arrive full of anxiety and expecting the worst! When possible, meet with employees in their offices where they are more likely to be comfortable and receptive. If they do not have a private office, use a location where you can talk privately.

Feedback usually will have the most impact when given as soon as possible after the behavior occurred. Positive feedback given soon after a behavior is most likely to reinforce the person repeating that behavior. The longer you wait to give feedback, the less likely even high praise will have the reinforcing result you want. When undesired behavior results in no feedback, the message is that the behavior is okay and the person is quite likely to continue it. Giving feedback promptly to let the person know that the behavior is not acceptable is more likely to result in change than waiting until the annual performance appraisal discussion!

When giving feedback word choices are a critically important component. How you deliver the words is equally important. Let's start with word choices. Considering the above guidelines, read the following examples and decide which are the better word choices.

1A - "Pat, your response to Juan's suggestion in the meeting today was inappropriate and was not in the spirit of teamwork."

1B - "Pat, when Juan offered his suggestion in today's meeting you rolled your eyes and said, 'You've got to be kidding'. I am concerned that what you said will discourage him and others from offering ideas in the future. What can you do to make sure that does not happen?"

Fairly obvious, right? 1A is judgmental and accusatory in tone even without hearing the tone of voice or seeing the speaker's facial expression. It also is not very specific feedback so Pat may not understand what behavior needs to be changed. In contrast, 1B describes specific behavior (rolling eyes) and words without judgment. The example also expresses the speaker's emotion (concerned) about a possible undesired consequence of the behavior and asks Pat what he or she might do to prevent the consequence from occurring. Very likely, Pat will get the message that the behavior is not welcome and that he/she is responsible for taking action to assure that the behavior will not have negative consequences. Much more effective than a scolding!

2A - "Juan, your suggestion in today's meeting about improving customer service by making personal phone calls to follow up with the customer after completing a project is worth considering. I appreciate your offering creative ideas. Will you please write a brief script for such calls that we can discuss at next week's meeting?"

2B - "Juan, good idea in the meeting today. Keep 'em coming!"

Both examples are positive. If you selected 2A as the better one, I agree. Again it is a more specific feedback about what Juan proposed and explains that it is worth consideration. Plus, it asks Juan to think about what should be communicated in such a call and to be prepared to share his ideas in the next meeting. 2B communicates approval and a desire for Juan to come up with more ideas but it does not have the power of 2A because it is only positive judgment accompanied by an expectation. To Juan, it is likely to feel like an approving parental pat on the head!

Learning to choose the words that will accomplish the desired objective of either reinforcing desired behavior or getting an undesired behavior stopped does require a considerable amount of practice! To develop skill with giving feedback you will benefit from practicing frequently. Look for opportunities to give feedback to others about their behavior. Take a little time to prepare by writing what you think will be effective. Ask someone you trust to read this article and then read what you have written and give you some feedback about your word choices. If he or she thinks that some improvement is needed, ask what words seem to be problematical and why, and discuss some alternative wordings that might be more effective. If you are working with a coach, ask your coach for feedback about your practice examples!

When you are content that you have an effective feedback wording, practice delivering the words with appropriate volume, voice tones, facial expressions, postures, etc.

For example, if you were delivering example 1B to Pat, you would want to be serious, somewhat firm when you start speaking with direct eye contact and serious (not disapproving) facial expression and a forward-leaning posture if seated. When quoting Pat's words, you would want to say those words with the same incredulous voice tones (or sarcastic) that Pat used in the meeting. Then you would want to look and sound concerned when you say the rest of the message. When you ask the final question look Pat in the eye, maintain eye contact with an expectant look and wait for Pat's response.

When delivering 2A you might start with a smile and positive head nods. When you express your appreciation add some nurturing tone to your voice. When you ask Juan to write a script put a little enthusiasm in your delivery and when Juan agrees to do it, add a big smile, say "Great!" and shake his hand!

It also is very important for the feedback discussion to be a dialogue (not a monologue). To achieve that goal it will be helpful to ask some open-ended questions such as "What are your thoughts about what I have told you?" or "What will you do in the future?". When the other person responds to your questions be sure to actively listen to what they say and paraphrase what you heard to confirm that you understood.

If the other person becomes defensive in response to your feedback it is very important for you to acknowledge their feelings (upset, concerned, confused, etc.) and restate what they said to prove that you heard accurately. I recommend that you end your restatement with a checkout question such as “Right?” or “Have I heard you correctly?” to invite the other person to either confirm or correct your restatement (the only way to know if you heard correctly). Your restatement with a feeling acknowledgement will also help to lower the other’s emotional temperature!

I wish you success with giving feedback to others in your life!

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