

Giving and Receiving Feedback Well

GETTING STARTED

When the thought of having to give or receive feedback arises, most people assume that the experience will be a negative and uncomfortable one. This isn't necessarily the case, though, and in fact it's good practice to highlight positive achievements or traits in any type of feedback situation.

Feedback is, in fact, a gift. If you're giving feedback, your main motivation is usually to see someone change their behavior for the better. Feedback is rarely given with ill intent, and so it can help people understand how they're perceived and how they may make positive changes to influence those perceptions. Perceptions are, of course, not always reality, but they're very real in their consequences, so being aware of these will help you to choose whether or not to perpetuate them.

FAQS

I recently experienced some feedback in my performance appraisal that I felt was unreasonable and misrepresented my motivations. What's the best way of dealing with such a situation?

If you're receiving feedback from someone who doesn't understand the process well or who has not had a lot of practice, you may need to coach or guide them by asking them specific questions that will encourage them to express themselves more clearly and suggest ways forward for you. For instance, if they told you that your recent presentation wasn't good, ask them what it was that you did to create that impression and what they think you could do differently another time.

You could also share any political dilemmas that you had in deciding your approach and ask what further ideas they had that you could have considered. For example, you may have had to contend with different interests or agendas among those in your audience, such as those between sales and marketing, or the opposing forces of cost-cutting and achieving quality standards.

Finally, if you feel it's appropriate, tell the other person how their feedback has made you feel so that he or she has an opportunity to change his or her style.

I find it difficult to speak to my manager and it's hard to make her see me in a better light. What can I do?

If you have a difficult relationship with the person who is giving you feedback, there may be occasions when you feel unable to respond, unfairly judged, or put on the spot. If this is the case, thank your manager for his or her comments and say that you'd like to consider them for a short while (during which you can seek advice from friends or colleagues) and ask for the meeting to be reconvened at a (not too distant) later date.

I'm the manager in a team where one of the team members isn't pulling his weight. This is beginning to cause bad feeling among everyone else. What's the most effective way of dealing with this?

Talk to the person involved as soon as you can, giving feedback from your own perspective, not on behalf of the rest of the team. (For example, use "I" statements not "We") Start with a question like "How do you think the team is working?" This will help you to uncover the person's feelings and give you a useful inroad to the situation. If that approach doesn't help, though, continue with something like: "You really are an important member of the team and you bring a great deal of expertise to it but lately you've seemed rather unhappy. Is there anything you need or would like to discuss?" This acknowledges a positive achievement first, and should protect the recipient from feeling criticized. You can then have a discussion about what's going on, what you'd like to see happen to resolve it, and how you might help to make that happen.

I've just received some 360 degree feedback which concerns me. How can I learn more about why I'm getting certain feedback if I can't confront the respondents?

360 degree feedback is a one-way process and is usually based on a promise of confidentiality. It's a process whereby key colleagues or "stakeholders" in a company comment on someone's performance so that he or she can get a picture of how others perceive them.

Confrontation is not a desired outcome of 360 degree feedback, or indeed of any other form of feedback. As the process is confidential, it allows people to speak freely, but the downside for feedback recipients is that, obviously, they don't know who said what, and this may make them feel frustrated. The positive side of the process is that it may tune you in to common perceptions people have about you and raise your awareness of potential behavioral issues that you may wish to deal with. There is nothing to stop you asking for further feedback from a different audience if you need more input on the perceptions that have been highlighted to you. Try not to preface any requests for additional help with a moan or complaint, though, even if your ego is feeling a bit bruised.

I've recently been given a managerial position which involves conducting performance reviews, and I know that one in particular will be challenging. How do I give feedback in this setting?

Unfortunately, annual performance appraisals tend to be the only time that people receive feedback on how they're doing. It's much better to give and receive feedback more regularly than this so that problems can be ironed out as they arise. If a review is looming, however, make sure that you're familiar with the reviewee's objectives and that you can back up your feedback (whether positive or negative) with evidence. Do not use hearsay or rumor to inform your feedback and don't get locked into giving your opinion or advice unless your offer of it is accepted or it's asked for by the reviewee. This is a trap that can give rise to defensive behavior and may lead to the review being ended early.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Giving and receiving feedback is one of many forms of communication that goes on every day at work. However, rather than being abstract, theoretical, or debatable, feedback is essentially extremely personal and thus highly relevant to the recipient. Unfortunately, many people feel that the most common type of feedback they receive is critical. Sadly we rarely receive as much praise as we do criticism, even though we know that someone receiving lots of positive encouragement performs much more effectively than those who are constantly put down.

Feedback is a mechanism for conveying to people how they're experienced and perceived by others. It provides the recipient with an opportunity to make decisions about whether or not they wish to change their behavior and the consequences of doing that. There are two parties associated with feedback: the giver and the receiver. Both may benefit from understanding and learning how to manage the dynamics of feedback.

Giving Feedback

Giving feedback is not easy. The very thought of it may conjure up bad memories if you've been on the receiving end of badly thought out or tactless feedback yourself, and, if it's an area with which you're unfamiliar or uncomfortable, a feedback session can easily spiral into a critical and defensive exchange rather than be a positive and illuminating experience.

Here are some important steps in making sure that the delivery of your feedback is constructive and well received:

- **Find an appropriate venue.** Make sure that the feedback session is held in a private place and that you can speak to the recipient without being distracted or interrupted. If you have an office, turn your phone on to voicemail or ask someone to field your calls, and remember to turn off your cell phone.
- **Make sure the reviewee is prepared.** If you're conducting a performance review, brief the reviewee so he or she has clear expectations on what will be taking place. This is usually built into the process through timed activities and deadlines but it's as well to make a mental check that each party is clear about

the purpose and boundaries of the meeting beforehand. You may ask the reviewee to prepare in a particular way for the meeting by describing the objectives they've met and how they've met them, reflecting on how they think they've been perceived and what development or additional resources they need to help them to perform in their roles more effectively.

- **Set the scene and create a conducive context for the feedback.** This would include preparing or copying any relevant documents, setting aside sufficient time, a private room, and some water or refreshments. Frame your intervention carefully, so that the recipient understands where you're coming from and what you're commenting upon. Be sure that he or she is willing to receive your feedback before you attempt to give it. If you think you feel defensiveness at the outset, address it directly. "I sense that you're uncomfortable with this process. Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?" You might want to add some reassurances also such as "Any comments we make today will stay within the confines of this room."

- **Be positive.** Lead with a positive piece of feedback to demonstrate that you've noticed and valued particular behavior. Deliver the feedback, taking care to be sensitive to the recipient's likely reactions and responding with your full attention and consideration. The feedback should be descriptive rather than evaluative and focus on behavior that can be changed rather than on personality. For example: "I've noticed that you've been finding your workload stressful recently," rather than "You were aggressive!" Remember to speak for yourself only, this means using "I" statements rather than hiding behind the views of a colleague or group.

- **Ask for feedback on the way you handled the feedback session.** Even if the session was difficult, it's an opportunity to build bridges and show your willingness to learn.

- **Honor any agreements made during the meeting.** If you've promised some additional resources, greater involvement in a project, or some training, confirm this afterwards in writing and follow it through.

- **Demonstrate the behavior you wish to see.** It's no good asking for something from others that you're not prepared to do yourself. You may want to introduce a culture of ongoing feedback so that issues aren't left for the performance review.

Receiving Feedback

The way we act reflects who we are to the world and when this is criticized or questioned, it can feel like an assault on our personalities. If you receive feedback that you find challenging or hard to deal with, try to see it as information that allows you to make informed choices about how you're perceived by others. In some circumstances, of course, the feedback (or the manner of it) may say more about the person communicating it to you than it does about you, but whether this is the case or not the best thing to do is to thank the person for their feedback and assure them that you'll think about it further.

You're not compelled to accept feedback and you may choose to maintain the behavior that feels right for you.

Remember the following when you're receiving feedback:

- **Listen carefully.** Even if you feel under attack, try not to leap to your own defense until you've had a chance to think about and understand the feedback thoroughly. Be genuinely open to hearing what the other person is saying and try not to interrupt or jump to conclusions. Active listening techniques may be helpful for you here.
- **Ask questions to clarify what's being said and why.** You are completely entitled to ask for specific examples and instances of the types of behavior that are at the root of the feedback. If the atmosphere is becoming tense, introduce a more positive approach by asking for examples of the behavior your reviewer would like to see more of.
- **Keep calm.** Even if you feel upset, try not to enter into an argument there and then; just accept what's being said and deal with your emotions another time and in another place. Stay calm and focus on the rest of the feedback.

Remember that giving feedback can be an uncomfortable experience too, and people generally don't do it unless they feel that you can benefit from their observations. Try to remain engaged throughout and don't start a "tit-for-tat" exchange.

Receiving feedback doesn't mean that you can't talk to the other person about your behavior. For example, you may want to ask if the giver has any suggestions about what you could do differently. You don't have to accept them, but at least it demonstrates a willingness on your part to take the feedback seriously.

Thank the person giving you feedback for taking the time and trouble to share their perceptions with you.

Honest and well-presented feedback allows people to enjoy good, open relationships. If feedback is a common feature of the way people communicate, issues aren't left to fester and grow out of all proportion. Some organizations have been known to benefit from instigating a culture of "instant constructive feedback," which encourages employees to address issues as they arise rather than leave them to fester or develop into crises. This approach not only diffuses the more destructive or passive-aggressive styles of relating to others, but it can have a genuine impact on profitability as ideas may be freely exchanged and innovative approaches discussed.

COMMON MISTAKES

The Feedback Session Falters Because of a Personality Clash

Giving feedback can very quickly turn into a personality clash when the means of achieving an objective is debated hotly and defensively. This happens when either or both parties believe they are right and are heavily invested in their own approach. In such a situation, people can become entrenched and dogmatic when a suggestion to do things differently is made. Try to maintain good rapport throughout, which includes the free expression of views, a genuine desire to understand each other's perspectives, and the absence of premature judgment or closure. If a feedback session veers off track, it can be brought back by calling a "time out" and then clarifying once more what the session is supposed to achieve. Reassessing what you're doing gives you an opportunity to talk through your values and assumptions and also provides a clear framework for the remainder of the session.

You Make Assumptions

Making assumptions about others' values, motivations, or intentions can quickly lead to the deterioration of rapport. Avoid this by making sure that each person has an opportunity to make these explicit. Don't assume you know the motivation behind someone's behavior but instead give them the chance to explain this early in the feedback session, perhaps as you set the context for your discussion. For example, ask open questions such as, "What were you hoping to convey when you gave your presentation?" From their answers, you can get very useful insights into that person's way of thinking and acting.

You Don't Admit There's a Problem

If things start getting out of hand, acknowledge that things are going wrong. By showing your vulnerability and humility, you'll be able to create a mood of trust and rebuild rapport.

THE BEST SOURCES OF HELP

Web Sites:

Active Reviewing guide: http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/3_9.htm

Giving and Receiving Feedback:

www.mapnp.org/library/commskls/feedback/feedback.htm

SelfhelpMagazine.com: www.selfhelpmagazine.com/articles/growth/feedback.html

The University of British Columbia: <http://co-op.arts.ubc.ca>