Giving and Receiving Feedback

What is feedback?

Feedback is helpful information that is given to someone to say what can be done to improve a performance, product, etc.

- Feedback can provide a ‘reality check’, confirming or challenging your own assessment.
- Feedback can shed light on your ‘blind spots’: areas of your performance that you are not aware of but that others have noticed.
- Giving and receiving feedback presents us with opportunities to change or improve, or to identify things that we do that others find helpful and that work well.

Despite these gains, many of us find the prospect of giving (and seeking) feedback uncomfortable, and this can be off-putting. Some basic rules for giving and receiving feedback can help make the experience positive and useful.

What does effective feedback look like?

When you give feedback:

Make sure that it is private. Find a time when you can give the discussion your undivided attention, and a place where you can speak privately. Then, effective feedback is:

- **C** Constructive: to give the receiver the opportunity to improve, not to allow the giver to vent their feelings!
- **R** Realistic: related to work and something they can do something about.
- **I** In good time: given in time to be useful, not when it is too late to act upon.
- **M** Manageable: people should be able to take it in. Too much, and they simply drown and feel helpless, particularly if there are some difficult messages included.
- **S** Specific: about specific behaviour or actions, not vague statements such as, “In general, you could do that better”. Instances, examples, times and dates all help to pin down the behaviour. Avoid interpretation such as “You didn’t do that, which suggests you are losing interest.” Instead, be descriptive: describe what you or others saw or felt.
- **O** Open: by ‘open’ read ‘honest’ and ‘owned by you’. Bear in mind feedback should be Constructive and Manageable as well, so always give it in the right spirit. If you are being open you can own the statements and say ‘I’, rather than hiding behind ‘we’ or ‘they’. For example, say “I think this needs addressing’ rather than “We think you need to change”. You don’t have to say everything you think: be as honest as you can be within the bounds of helpfulness.
- **N** Non-judgmental: you are simply describing behaviours and your observations and feelings around these. You are not judging the person. It is a case of, “You do/did this” not “You are this”.

When you have to give negative feedback:

- Set the negative feedback in context (e.g., “The vast majority of what you do is fine, much of it is outstanding ...”, or “You usually do a good job on this. This is only one occasion I am talking about ...”)
- Accentuate the opportunity (e.g., “I realise you care about your work and that is why you have found this feedback a little difficult, but the way I see it is it gives us the opportunity to discuss what can be done to put it behind you and show what you can do ...”)
- Methods which do these include
  - ‘Two stars and a wish’: talk about two aspects which are good and one which could use improvement.

Oxford Learning Institute
Praise sandwich: “The report you produced was well written...however it was late so I couldn’t use it at the meeting I wanted it for. But the layout was very good.”

When you receive feedback

Try to accept it graciously, even if it is uncomfortable: this shows you in a professional, assertive light. There is an art to receiving feedback just as there is to giving it, and it includes having the right frame of mind: being willing to listen and reflect, rather than react in a reflexive, ‘knee-jerk’ way. It is often best to simply say ‘Thank you’ and then pause and give yourself time to digest what is being said and how to respond to it constructively and positively.

When receiving negative feedback:
- Recognise the value of feedback, the information and opportunities it gives you.
- Distinguish between the feedback content and your reaction to it.
- Ensure you listen closely. Don’t interrupt, but...
- ...if the feedback is vague, you can seek clarification at the end, e.g. ask for more specific feedback and specific instances.
- Thank them for the feedback, and, if it is appropriate, apologise.
- Decide what to do with the feedback: pause and give yourself time to digest what is being said and how to respond to it constructively and positively.
- Remember, feedback is not necessarily ‘reality’, it is a snapshot of your from a particular angle, at a particular moment, through someone else’s lens.
- Close the loop at some point by discussing with your manager what you did with the feedback and why.

Summary

1. Feedback is a valuable way to learn about ourselves and improve our performance.
2. Effective feedback is
   - Constructive, intended and designed to give the receiver the opportunity to improve
   - Realistic
   - In good time
   - Manageable
   - Specific
   - Open (and as honest as you can be within the bounds of helpfulness)
   - Non-judgmental (about behaviour, not personality)
   - and private.
3. When you give negative feedback, there are ways you can help it be received in a positive frame of mind: set it in context, and accentuate the opportunity for positive change.
4. When you receive negative feedback, try to accept it graciously: listen and reflect, rather than reacting in a reflexive, ‘knee-jerk’ way.
5. Without feedback, we risk carrying on doing things in a way that could be better, just because we didn’t know how they could be better.

References, further information and resources


Mindtools: Giving Feedback