How To Give Effective Feedback

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Giving and receiving feedback is a vital skill for unleashing the power of people. Feedback can reinforce productive behaviors, while bringing attention and corrective action to unproductive ones. Research shows, however, that feedback is the least adopted business behavior. Our objective here is to illustrate a straightforward process for giving feedback. When we become proficient at giving feedback, it becomes a gift that we give to others, building trust, collaboration and engagement.

Challenges In Giving Feedback

Giving effective feedback is hard for many people. This is often based on the assumptions and beliefs we hold about ourselves and others, including the emotions that show up. For example, we may avoid giving feedback because we are “too busy” or we don’t want to “hurt the other person”. We may abdicate responsibility by saying “it’s not my job”. Or we are afraid of how the person will react or we don’t know how to say it. The body gets flooded with chemicals like endorphins, dopamine and cortisol, which activate the fight or flight response. As a result, we end up giving feedback in a way that is less than ideal.

The Opportunity

Most engagement surveys indicate that people do not receive enough feedback and would like more. This includes both positive and developmental feedback. As human beings we like to be seen and acknowledged. Developing people includes sharing what they are doing well, as well as their development opportunities.

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So how do we give feedback in way that honors the other person, supports their learning, builds trust, supports the relationship and leads to better performance? Effective feedback is built around five principles:

1. Provide Context
2. Be factual
3. Share the impact it had on you
4. Invite feedback
5. Make a request

The first 3 are the most important principles. Let's look a simple method that captures these first 3.

Situation – Behavior – Impact (SBI)

An excellent booklet titled Feedback That Works[1] captures the essence of the first 3 principles: *Provide Context, Be Factual*, and *Share the impact it had on you*. It uses a simple process that the author calls SBI: Situation → Behavior → Impact.

- **Situation**: provide context for the behavior that you want to give feedback on. For example, when you saw the behavior and where. For example: "*This morning, at our staff meeting…*" "*Last Tuesday, when presenting to our client…*"
- **Behavior**: be factual in describing the behavior that you saw. Behaviors are the observable actions people take, without adding meaning (e.g. instead of "you looked angry" say "I noticed your voice got loud, your face got red and your tone and pace suddenly changed."). Avoid making judgments (e.g., right/wrong, better/worse), yet speak from your own perspective (e.g., using "I" statements). For example: "*…I heard you speaking softly, shuffling your feet, and making comments that many of us couldn't hear.*"
- **Impact**: share what you *felt* as a result of it; your feelings are irrefutable because they're your experience. Also, acknowledge *from your perspective* the effect that the other person's behavior had on you and on others. For example: "*I felt relieved in knowing that you grasp the situation*." "*I felt confused and unsure about our next steps.*" *"I thought that your comments might create a loss of credibility for our team and reduce the likelihood of us being trusted with future high-dollar projects."*

Inviting Feedback

After giving feedback, it's useful to invite the other person to respond to our feedback, especially after we have just given them constructive feedback. This gives the other person the opportunity to provide additional clarity and context, to thank us, or to express to us how they feel about our feedback. It's a valuable opportunity for us to get feedback on how we're delivering our feedback so that we can continue to improve our delivery!

Inviting feedback is particularly important when we deliver constructive feedback to the other person. A simple way to invite it is by saying, "*What did you hear and feel about what I said?*"

[1] Sloan R. Weitzel, *Feedback That Works: how to Build and Deliver Your Message* (Center for Creative Leadership: 2000) www.CCL.org/publications

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Notice that giving and receiving feedback are two processes that work side-by-side. When we give feedback, the other person receives it, and vice-versa. When receiving feedback, it's useful for us to be silent, open, and receptive. Assume that the other person has good intent. Don't interrupt unless it's necessary (e.g. the feedback giver drones on for too long or has ill-intent). Focus on finding the gift in the feedback that you're receiving.

Making A Request

The last step in the process is to make a request. What would you like the other person to start, stop, and continue doing? How can you word it to make it easy for the other person to do?

For example:

- "*Please continue doing that. It's making us look good!*"
- "*I request that anytime you bring up a concern or opportunity, that you begin by giving us the headline of your message. Then, you can give us the appropriate level of details.*"

Putting It All Together

We refer to our feedback process as **SBI**fr – **Situation → Behavior → Impact →** feedback -> request. We emphasize **SBI** because they're the three most important steps in the process. The "fr" steps, although very useful, aren't always necessary.

Approaching someone to give them feedback can be as simple as saying to them "*May I share an observation with you?*" Sometimes, however, the process can feel awkward or uncomfortable. In such situations, acknowledging the discomfort can help. For example: "*I'm noticing some flutters in my stomach as I'm about to share with you*."

Lastly, here are a couple of examples of **SBI**fr in action!

"*Maria, this morning, as I walked into my office, I saw that you had arrived early, decorated Jan's office, and placed a birthday cake on her desk. I felt happy to work with a group of friends that care for each other like family*."

Mike: "*John, yesterday, at the customer briefing, I saw you typing on your phone and very engrossed in what you were doing. When the customer asked a question from your area of expertise, I didn't hear you answer. I felt like we weren't being attentive to our client's needs."*

Mike: "What are you hearing in all this?"

John: *"I'm sorry Mike. My daughter is in the hospital and I was getting a status update from her doctor."*

Mike: *"We know your daughter is going through a difficult period and we want to support you. At the same time, how can we do this next time so that your daughter is taken care of, and our customer feels we're attentive to their needs?"*

John: *"I'll make sure my wife is available to interact with the doctor when I'm in an important meeting."*

Mike: *"That works well for me, John. Thank you."*

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