

Giving and Receiving Feedback

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Most people assume that the experience of giving or receiving feedback will be a negative and uncomfortable one. This doesn't have to be the case, however. It is good practice to highlight positive achievements or traits in any type of feedback situation.

Feedback is, in fact, a gift. When providing feedback, the main motivation is typically to effect a behavior change for the better. Feedback is rarely given with ill intent; it helps people understand how they are perceived and how they may make positive changes to influence those perceptions. Of course, perceptions are not always reality—but they are very real in their consequences. Being aware of these perceptions allows a feedback recipient to choose whether or not to perpetuate them.

What You Need to Know

In a recent performance appraisal, I received some feedback that I felt was unreasonable and misrepresented my motivations. What is the best way of dealing with such a situation?

You may be receiving feedback from someone who is uncomfortable with the process or has not had a lot of practice. If this is the case, ask specific questions that will encourage them to be more clear and/or to make suggestions for you. For example, if they told you that your recent presentation was poor, ask them what actions created that impression and what they suggest you do differently next time. You might explain your approach, and request their insight on additional considerations. For example, perhaps you were contending with different interests or agendas within your audience (i.e. sales vs. marketing), or trying to accommodate opposing forces (i.e. cutting costs and achieving quality standards).

Finally, if you feel it is 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 is hard to make her see me in a better light. What can I do?

If you have a difficult relationship with a person who is providing feedback, you may feel unable to respond, unfairly judged, or put on the spot. In this case, thank your manager for her comments and say that you would like to consider them for a short while, during which you can seek advice from friends or colleagues. Request that the discussion continue at another time in the near future.

One of my team-members is not pulling his weight. This is beginning to cause bad feeling among everyone else. As a manager, what is the most effective way of dealing with this?

Talk to the person involved as soon as you can. It is important to provide feedback from your own perspective, not on behalf of the rest of the team—for example, use “I” statements instead of “we.” Lead with a question such as “How do you think the team is working?” This will reveal his perspective and may offer useful insight. Continue with something like: “You really are an important member of the team who has a great deal of expertise, 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 team member from feeling attacked. Have a discussion about what is occurring, what you would like to see happen to improve the situation, and how you might help make that occur.

I have just received some “360-degree feedback” which concerns me. How can I learn more about why I am getting certain feedback if I cannot confront those responsible?

The term “360-degree feedback” applies to a process in which key colleagues or “stakeholders” in a company comment on an employee’s performance, providing a picture of how others perceive them. This is intended as a one-way process, and is usually based on a promise of confidentiality.

Confrontation is not a desired outcome of 360-degree feedback, or indeed of any form of constructive feedback. As the process is confidential, it allows people to speak freely. The downside for feedback recipients is that, because of the anonymity, they may feel frustrated. The upside is the insight it provides into others’ perceptions, raising awareness of potential behaviors the recipient may wish to change. Consider asking for additional feedback from a different audience if you need more input on the perceptions that concern you. Do not preface requests for additional insight by griping or complaining, though, even if your ego has been bruised.

I have recently been given a managerial position which involves conducting performance appraisals, and I know that one in particular will be challenging. How do I handle this situation?

Unfortunately, annual performance appraisals are often the only time that people receive feedback on how they are doing. It is a much better practice to give and solicit feedback more regularly, so that problems can be addressed as they arise. If a performance review is looming, however, make sure that you are familiar with the reviewee’s objectives. Collect concrete examples to support your feedback, whether positive or negative. Do not rely on hearsay or rumor to inform your feedback, and

don't go overboard with your opinion or advice if the reviewee is not receptive. This is a trap that will foster defensive behavior and may lead to the review session ending prematurely.

What to Do

Giving and receiving feedback is one of many forms of professional communication. Feedback is not abstract, theoretical, or debatable—it is extremely personal and thus highly relevant to the recipient. Sadly, criticism is much more common than praise, even though we know that positive encouragement fosters effective performance much more effectively than criticism.

Feedback is a mechanism for conveying to people how they are perceived by others. It provides the recipient with an opportunity to evaluate their behavior, consider changes to it, and contemplate the consequences of making such changes. There are two parties associated with feedback: one who supplies it (the “reviewer”) and one who receives it (the “reviewee”). Both may benefit from understanding and learning how to manage the dynamics of feedback.

Giving Feedback

Giving feedback is no easy task. The very thought of it may evoke bad memories if you have ever received poorly thought-out or tactless feedback. As a reviewer, you must be prepared. A feedback session is meant to be a positive and illuminating experience for the reviewee, but it can easily spiral into a critical and defensive exchange if you are not comfortable or familiar with the process.

Here are some important steps to ensure that your feedback is constructive and well-received:

- Be prepared. Put time and thought into the process of preparing your feedback; collect concrete examples which illustrate your points. Make sure to balance constructive feedback with praise and positive feedback.
- 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. Always turn off your cell phone and, in your own office, forward your phone to voicemail or have someone field your calls.
- Make sure the reviewee is prepared. If you're conducting a performance review, brief the reviewee so that he or she has clear expectations. This is often built into the process through timed activities and deadlines, but it is important to ensure that each party understands the purpose and boundaries prior to the meeting. You may ask the reviewee to prepare for the meeting by describing the objectives they have met and how they have done so; reflecting on how they think they have been perceived; and listing any development needs or additional resources they need to help them perform more effectively.
- Create a supportive context for the feedback. Be sure that the reviewee is receptive to your feedback before you supply it. Prepare or copy any relevant documents, allocate sufficient time, secure an appropriate venue, and provide some water or refreshments. Frame your

communication carefully, so that the reviewee understands your perspective and what you want to discuss. If you sense defensiveness, address it directly. Say, for example, “I sense that you are uncomfortable with this process. Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?” You might want to provide any needed reassurance, such as “Any comments we make today will stay within the confines of this room.”

- Be positive. Lead with a positive feedback item to demonstrate that you do observe and value certain performance. Then deliver the constructive feedback, taking care to be sensitive to the reviewee’s likely reactions, and responding with your full attention and consideration. The constructive feedback should be descriptive rather than evaluative, and focus on behavior that can be changed rather than on personality. For example, saying “I have noticed that you’ve been finding your workload stressful recently,” is more effective than “You were too aggressive!” Remember to speak for yourself only, using “I” statements rather than hiding behind the views of a colleague or group.
- Ask for feedback on your handling of the feedback session. Even if the session was difficult, it can be an opportunity to build bridges and show your willingness to learn.
- Honor any agreements made during the meeting. If you have promised some additional resources, greater involvement in a project, or additional training, confirm this in writing after the session and follow through.
- Demonstrate the behavior you wish to see. Don’t ask for something from others that you are not prepared to do yourself; lead by example. Introduce a culture of ongoing feedback rather than deferring issues until the performance review.

Honest and well-presented feedback facilitates good, open relationships. If feedback is not communicated, issues can fester and grow out of proportion. To avoid this, consider instigating a culture of “instant constructive feedback,” encouraging employees to address issues as they arise rather than allowing them to develop into crises. This approach diffuses destructive or passive-aggressive styles of relating to others, and can also have a genuine impact on profitability by encouraging the free exchange of ideas and innovative approaches.

Receiving Feedback

Our behavior reflects who we are to the world. When our behavior is criticized or questioned, it can feel like a personal assault. When you receive feedback that you find hard to accept, view it as an opportunity to make more informed choices about how you are perceived by others. In some circumstances, of course, the feedback may say more about the person delivering it than it does about you. Regardless, it is best to simply thank the reviewer for their feedback and assure them that you will consider it further. You are not compelled to accept feedback, and you may choose to maintain the behavior that feels right for you.

Remember the following when you receive feedback:

- Listen carefully. Even if you feel attacked, resist leaping to your own defense until you have had a chance to reflect on and thoroughly process the feedback. Listen to what the other person is

saying and avoid interrupting or jumping to conclusions. Active listening techniques can be very helpful.

- Ask questions. Clarify what is being said, and why. You are completely entitled to ask for specific examples of the performance that generated the feedback. If the atmosphere becomes tense, employ a more positive approach by asking for examples of the behavior your reviewer would prefer.
- Keep calm. Even if you feel upset, resist the urge to argue. Simply accept what is being said and deal with your emotions at a later time. Stay calm and focus on the rest of the feedback.

Remember that giving feedback can be an uncomfortable experience too. Feedback is generally offered when the reviewer feels that you can benefit from their observations. Try to remain engaged throughout and do not start a “tit-for-tat” exchange.

The protocol for receiving feedback does not prohibit talking to the reviewer about your performance. For example, consider asking the reviewer to suggest another way of handling a situation. This demonstrates your willingness to take the feedback seriously. Thank your reviewer for taking the time and trouble to share their perceptions with you.

What to Avoid

You fall into a personality clash

A feedback session can result in a personality clash when the means of achieving an objective becomes a source of debate. This happens when either or both parties strongly believe that they are right and are heavily invested in their own approach. People become entrenched and resist any suggestions to do things differently. Avoid this non-productive situation by maintaining good rapport. Allow the free expression of views, exhibit a genuine desire to understand the other perspective, and avoid premature judgment or closure. If a feedback session veers off track, take a break from debate and clarify the original objective. By reassessing the purpose, you create an opportunity to talk through your values and assumptions, and provide a clear framework for the remainder of the session.

You make assumptions

Making assumptions about an individual's values, motivations, or intentions can quickly lead to the deterioration of rapport. Avoid this by ensuring that each reviewee has an opportunity to make these explicit. Do not assume that you know the motivation behind someone's behavior. Instead, give them the chance to explain it 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

delivered your presentation?" From the answers, you can glean very useful insights into a reviewee's way of thinking and acting.

You refuse to admit there is a problem

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

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

Giving and Receiving Feedback: www.mapnp.org/library/commskls/feedback/feedback.htm

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