



Can I give you some feedback?

Ironic how this well-intentioned question almost universally stirs up resistance. Anticipating a negative statement, our defense mechanisms get triggered. And yet, to continue to grow; to create the environment of a learning organization, we must be able to regularly give and receive constructive, real time feedback.

This column is about how to engage in the kind of honest dialogue that fosters growth and relationships. Giving and receiving feedback is a strong method for that. And, no, “feedback” is not a euphemism for chewing someone out. Nor is this about how to soften a critical message that needs to be unequivocally delivered. The most valuable feedback is clear, concise and candid. It’s delivered with respect and with the intention of getting in front of an issue together to improve performance and/or relationships.

Feedback is meant to affect change. Initially, it may serve to ignite an increased awareness about the impact of one’s actions. For example: I was asked by a General Manager of a construction firm to facilitate their next team meeting. Five minutes into the meeting, he took over. Afterwards a project manager took me aside to explain that the GM has a history of usurping people’s responsibilities. When I spoke with the owner of the company, she agreed that this was a common occurrence and it was negatively impacting people’s willingness to take initiative. At the close of the day, I sat with the GM in his office and asked if I could give him some feedback. When I shared my experience and my concern his leadership style was having on the culture of the organization, it was clear he had no idea the impact he was having! His intentions were good – he was trying to move the company forward; but his methodologies were counterproductive. Without the feedback, he had blinders on. Armed with this new knowledge, he started practicing behaviors that served to empower his team.

Feedback can be positive, such as acknowledging someone for what they’ve done. It’s powerful to affirm what’s working. People need to be recognized and appreciated. Helping your teammates understand what they are doing well builds more positive contributions. It fuels motivation and traction for getting things accomplished. The more challenging kind of feedback is that which requires a change in attitude and/or behavior. It’s not only difficult to receive; it can also be difficult to give.



How can you provide the kind of feedback that inspires positive change?

Mind your intent. By starting with the right intent, people are more likely to trust what you are about to say. When you articulate your concerns in the context of a common goal and in a non-threatening, non-judgmental and encouraging manner, you'll find individual and organizational growth a natural by-product.

Catch them in the act, real time. When you observe something working, or not working, address it. If it's a positive attitude or behavior, acknowledge specifically what you appreciated. If it's a something you want to see changed, create a time and space to privately speak to the person. Key here is to not let it build up. When things are left unsaid, poor habits form and frustrations breed. The timelier it is, the more rapidly everyone reaps the rewards.

Avoid global feedback. Feedback is most effective when it is focused on specific attitudes and behaviors, with clear examples. For instance, rather than saying, "David, great job on the meeting!" you might say, "David, I appreciated how you ran today's meeting. You kept the team focused, you gained participation from everyone and you captured our action items. That kind of facilitation is keeping this project on track. Thank you." Now David knows what's important to you and what to continue to do in the future.

No sandwiches please. I often see managers provide constructive criticism "sandwiched" between compliments. Resist the temptation to do this. While it might feel gentler, it only serves to confuse the recipient by sending mixed messages. Also, anytime you provide positive feedback, people are expecting the other shoe to drop. The sandwich method doesn't allow them to fully receive a compliment or fully comprehend the impact of the intended course correction. Tell it to them straight!

Be Direct, Concise, Candid, Honest and Respectful. In short, give feedback the way you might appreciate someone else giving it to you. Make sure it's thoughtful and well considered, rather than impulsive (*easier to do when you don't let stuff build up*). Initiating the conversation may feel daunting. Begin with a non-accusatory, objective phrase such as "Let's discuss" or "I have some thoughts about ..."

Speak to the desired change. If you are providing constructive criticism, be sure to articulate what you want instead. Don't just tell them what they are doing wrong; help them understand the precise behaviors and results desired. Be sure to have the recipient paraphrase back to you



what he or she heard. You'll want to make sure the feedback you gave was what was actually intended and understood!

Be a role model for receiving feedback. If someone asks you, "Can I give you some feedback?" respond with an inquisitive mind and enthusiastic attitude. Listen and act on the feedback in a way that demonstrates a commitment to your own continual improvement.

Providing regular feedback establishes clear expectations, direction and support. It concomitantly reduces ambiguity and frustrations and builds trust. When a company has a culture of regularly providing feedback, members of the team know where they stand at any point in time, not just during the company's annual review process. It creates a dynamic that says you will address issues promptly and not tolerate mediocrity; all while perpetuating growth.

Take the K Challenge: Start integrating feedback into your daily conversations with members of your team. You'll soon build a culture of growth, accountability and excellence!



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