

Guidelines for Giving Constructive Feedback

Be clear about what you want to say in advance

Practise what you want to say beforehand with someone else if necessary. It may be useful to write down what you want to say. (Prepare to tell the person three things you liked, two things you want them to improve on, and one more thing you liked to end on a positive note).

Start with the positive

Don't always focus on the negative. For example, if a child gets 3 'A's and one 'B', don't put all your focus on the 'B'.

Most people need encouragement and need to be told when they are doing something well. When offering feedback it can really help the receiver to hear first what you like about them or what they have done well.

Start by telling them three things you liked - and be specific

For example, when giving feedback to a speaker about his speech: to say, "I liked your humour" is fine, but to say, "I liked the joke you made about falling down – it got a laugh and made your serious message easier to hear" is much better.

Think of the last time you were acknowledged for the positive things you do, rather than just receiving critical attention for your mistakes. You probably felt wonderful and motivated, and had positive feelings towards the giver of the praise.

Do not give people too much feedback

If you overload people with feedback, it reduces the chances that they will use it. When you give people more feedback than they can understand, you are satisfying some need in yourself rather than helping the other person become more self-aware. Don't save it all up and give the person one huge bundle, especially if there is considerable negative feedback to be given.

Select two priority areas and mention only two things they should improve. In this way, they won't feel attacked and overwhelmed. Two actions are easier to keep in mind, correct and follow through with. More than two may become overwhelming, and it is then more likely no changes will occur.

It's even more important in this step to be specific. If you can, demonstrate what you mean. For example, when giving feedback to a speaker, demonstrate the voice you think might be more effective, or the body language or whatever other improvements you think could be made. This feedback, with clear demonstration of an alternate way to act, is positive and clear. "Don't wave your arms" does not help and can be seen as just a criticism (What do you mean? What do I do instead?). Rather say, "When you wave your arms it is distracting to me. May I suggest that next time, you hang your arms at your side (physically demonstrate), then you can use them to powerfully make your point when you need to."

(Note: You did not say "You made me feel ... ", because they didn't make you feel. You felt it; they did not force you to feel).

Pay attention to the wording. "I feel" rather than "you should". This is far more effective and useful.

End with telling them the one thing you liked most. Leave the person feeling good about something they did really well. Again, the more specific your feedback, the more motivational and useful it is.

Focus on the behaviour not the person/personality

Refer to what the person does, not to what you imagine his/her traits to be. Thus, you might say that you think the person, "talked too much in that meeting" rather than say the person "is domineering". The former is an observation of what you saw and heard and the latter is an inference about the person's character.

Be descriptive rather than judgmental

Refer to what occurred, not to your judgements of right or wrong, good or bad, or nice or naughty. You might say, "You do not pronounce your words clearly, and you speak too softly to be heard" ,rather than, "You are a terrible public speaker".

Judgements arise out of a value system. Descriptions represent neutral reporting.

Focus on a specific situation rather than on abstract behaviour

What a person does is related to a time and place. Feedback that ties behaviour to a specific situation increases self-awareness. Avoid abstract, broad impressions such as "You were brilliant", or "It was awful", or "You don't listen to other people". Rather say, "I really liked the way you looked after Tracy when she was upset yesterday". Or "When you and John were talking just now, you looked out the window and seemed to be thinking of something else."

Focus on the "here and now" not on the "there and then"

The more immediate the feedback the more helpful it is. Instead of saying, "Last year you didn't speak to me in the hallway" say, "Hey, I just said hello and you didn't reply. Is something wrong?"

Note: The only exception to this would be when you are so angry that you would be unlikely to give constructive feedback. In this case, rather wait until you have calmed down before giving feedback.

Share your perceptions and feelings, not advice

Feedback which demands change, or is imposed heavily on the other person may invite resistance, and is not consistent with the idea that we are personally autonomous. Skilled feedback offers people information about themselves in a way that leaves them with a choice about whether to act on it or not.

When you give advice, you tell other people what to do with the information and thereby take away their freedom to choose for themselves what to do. You can give feedback such as "You look away and blush whenever Joe says hello to you, so he just continues walking," without giving advice such as, "You are too shy. Just stop and talk to Joe - give him a break!"

Focus on behaviour that the person can change

It does no good to tell a person about something that they cannot change.

For example "I really don't like your face/ your height / the fact that you are male, female" etc. Rather focus on the effectiveness of their actions. For example "I would prefer it if you looked at me when we speak," can give the person something to work on.

Own the feedback

It can be easy to say to the other person "You are..." suggesting that you are offering a universally agreed opinion about that person. This is not the case. You are probably only expressing your own opinion, or perhaps that of just a few others.

It is important to take responsibility for the feedback we offer. Use the golden "I" here. Beginning the feedback with "I feel... " or " In my opinion..." rather than, "You should...or You are..." is a way of taking ownership of the feedback and avoiding the impression that you are giving 'universal judgements' about the person.

Do not force feedback on other people

Feedback is given to help people to become more aware and to improve their effectiveness. It is not given to make you feel better. Feedback should serve the needs of the receiver, not the needs of the giver.

Do not give feedback if the receiver is defensive, upset or uninterested in it. Even if you are upset and want more than anything else in the world (at that moment) to give some feedback, do not give it.

This document forms part of my materials developed for HELM
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