

The Art and Science of Feedback

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When done well, feedback promotes learning, development and confidence says Jason Liem

Every now and then we need to get ourselves to an unfamiliar destination. We then reach for our phones, type in an address and a map app finds the best route.

Although you trust the map's route, do you ever find yourself looking for road signage to confirm you are heading in the right direction? We all do this. The physical feedback of posted signs instills certainty and confidence that we are headed in the right direction.

The Importance of Feedback

One of the most important communication skills any of us can learn is how to give feedback. If done well it promotes learning, development, and confidence. If done poorly it can have the opposite impact.

Learning to give feedback is like any other skill. We grow more adept at something the more we practice.

Types of Feedback

There are four types of feedback. I'll invest time exploring supportive and corrective feedback. I only want to say a few words about abusive and insignificant feedback.

Supportive feedback

Supportive feedback makes clear what we did well so we can repeat that behaviour. It recognises a person's efforts and contributions in the moment.

Corrective feedback

Corrective feedback is more nuanced than giving supportive feedback, because it can be seen as confrontational in nature. Corrective feedback is about addressing a behavioural or performance issue.

Abusive feedback

Abusive feedback is laden with insults, putdowns, and sarcasm. It serves no purpose other than to demean and hurt people.



Insignificant feedback

Insignificant feedback is abstract, vacuous, and useless. It is when someone tells us that we did a good job, but does not specify exactly what we did well. When we hear this once or twice we can accept it. When we detect a pattern where there is neither content nor depth to the feedback we tend to ignore it and label the feedback as superficial. This type of feedback actually eats away at the trust in a relationship.

What is worse is when we receive no feedback. At least with insignificant feedback, there is some level of recognition. What is far worse for human beings is when we are completely ignored. Our presence and effort is not even deemed worthy of notice or comment.

Two Key Elements of Feedback

There are two key building blocks to giving feedback – the task and social elements.

The task element is the quantitative part of feedback. This includes what can be either measured and/or observed, such as delivering on deadlines or showing up to meetings on time. It could entail how I communicate and collaborate with my colleagues. Am I too

abstract or too detailed? Do I speak with a diplomatic tone or an aggressive tone? Am I able to prioritise and organise my tasks?

The task element should be specific and concrete. It is also important to illustrate it with an example. The idea is to paint as vivid a picture as possible.

The second building block is the social element. It is the qualitative part of the feedback. It is how I feel about something or someone's behaviour or performance.

For example, I can communicate that I appreciate or am thankful for a person's contribution. I can also mention that I am concerned, worried or frustrated by what someone said or did.

The social element is important. It helps the recipient to gauge how he/she should respond based on how we feel.

To be even more specific I can use qualifiers to give emphasis. Instead of saying 'I am concerned', I can instead say "I am slightly concerned" or 'I am very concerned.'

Using qualifiers helps the recipient to interpret your feelings with more precision.

How to Give Feedback

What is the number one rule to giving feedback?

Give feedback based on someone's behaviour and not their personality. The best way to do this is to avoid using the verb 'to be' (i.e. you are or you were).

People are more willing to accept feedback when it is about something they said or did (i.e. an action or behaviour). Although unintentional, we can offend people if we address their personality or character.

The Supportive Feedback Model

The following is a 4-step process I teach clients when they want to give supportive feedback.

- 1 Describe the specific behaviour.
- 2 Describe the consequences of the behaviour.
- 3 Describe how you feel about the behaviour.
- 4 Describe the reason why you feel that way.

The first two sentences address the behaviour and its consequences. This is the task element. The latter two sentences address the social element of feedback.

Here is an example

"Jennifer, thanks for putting together the project update on such short notice. It was great how you ordered the data and explained the findings in simple and clear terms. The report had a very positive impact on the clients. I very much appreciate your help on this one. It not only saved us time and money, but the quality of your work hit home the importance of the project. Thanks again."

The Corrective Feedback Model

Many of us feel awkward or uncomfortable when we need to give corrective feedback. We see it as a type of conflict and most of us would rather avoid conflict.

The first step is to reframe corrective feedback as a developmental conversation. It is about

growth and learning. It's not about conflict. How can anyone develop if they don't know where they can make improvements? Feedback provides this insight. It is the road signage indicating I'm headed in the right direction.

Giving corrective feedback is very similar to supportive feedback, except for one additional step.

In the fifth sentence we ask the recipient what he/she could do to resolve the situation. Asking a question involves the recipient to find a solution. This creates ownership and fosters responsibility in the recipient to resolve the situation.

- 5 Describe the specific behaviour.
- 6 Describe the consequences of the behaviour.
- 7 Describe how you feel about the behaviour.
- 8 Describe the reason why you feel that way.
- 9 Ask the recipient what they think he/she could do to improve or resolve the issue.

Here is an example:

"Jack, I need to address the tone you took during this morning's project update meeting. I found it to be quite aggressive and rather negative. The impact of it shut down the participation of the others in the meeting. Your tone surprised me and also frustrated me. It surprised me because this is not typical of you. It frustrated me because we had to reschedule the meeting. We are already behind schedule as it is. What are your thoughts about what happened? What do you think we can do to avoid a similar situation from playing out again? How can I help you?"

Asking For and Receiving Feedback

Feedback is an essential component in our personal and professional development. It gives insight about ourselves that we may not be aware of.

If feedback is to have value then we want to approach people we respect and trust. This might be a close colleague, but it can also be someone who you cross swords with on occasion. When asking for feedback, I find it best to give people a few days to think about

it. This way their feedback is well-considered and measured.

I find the following five questions help people to organise their thoughts.

- 10 What is one thing that I do well?
- 11 What is one thing I could improve?
- 12 What could I do more of?
- 13 What could I do less of?
- 14 What is one thing that I could either change or eliminate to improve...(cooperation, communication, work flow etc.)?

Most of the feedback we receive will tend to confirm aspects of ourselves that we already know. There may also be feedback that blindsides us leaving us discombobulated. Whether it is the former or the latter, thank the person for taking the time for giving you feedback. Then think about what you heard and put it into context.

Building Bridges Between Silos

Organisational silos spring up when teams get wrapped up in their own objectives. This is not so strange if you add into the mix work overload and looming deadlines. In doing so teams can lose sight of the bigger organisation and how all the puzzle pieces fit together.

One effective way to build bridges between teams is to ask for and share feedback.

I find it is best to gather those individuals, from the different teams, who interact most with each other. Get them to sit down to give and receive feedback to each other based on the above five questions.

From my experience, a lot of solid content results from this exercise. It starts a conversation, which leads to more collaboration. In the end, silos can only come down when the quality and quantity of the conversation increases.

In Conclusion

Feedback is both an art and a science. It improves engagement and working relationships. It provokes change, fuels growth and gives people a sense of purpose.

about the author



Jason W Birkevold Liem helps people to think about their thinking so they are better at managing themselves, others and situations. He achieves this through an informative and engaging process that educates people about the brain, cognitive psychology and interpersonal communication. As a result, clients are better able to face their professional and private challenges with more confidence, certainty and clarity. Through his company, MINDtalk, he designs and delivers brain-based leadership and personal resilience programs to individuals and to teams. Learn more at www.MINDtalk.no.

