

Seven Suggestions for Giving Feedback to Other People

Feedback is information offered by one person to another about the impact of their actions or behaviour. It is different from constructive criticism which implies a judgement or opinion about a person or their work. Feedback is given with the intention of improving or praising what someone is doing. Giving someone information about the impact of their actions allows them to make an informed decision about whether to continue or change what they are doing.

1 Give feedback on what can change

Feedback works best when the information you offer is based on something that can change. For example, a person can change the way they behave more easily than their inherent personality traits. *"I've noticed that you have come late to the last three team meetings. The late start has meant that we haven't got through everything on the agenda"* is an example of information about behaviour that can change. Compare it with this statement which judges and gives advice: *"You are not very punctual, you should be more organised so you are not late for meetings"*. Even if you are talking about a situation that has passed and cannot be rectified, orientate your feedback towards what could be different in future.

2 Be specific and clear

Carefully and accurately describe the specific action or behaviour you are talking about. Don't exaggerate or generalise. Consider the difference between: *"There are several grammatical errors in this report that need changing before it's submitted"* and *"We can't submit this, it's full of mistakes"*. You can imagine that your own response to these statements would be quite different. Specific statements don't rouse such an emotional response and they give the other person somewhere to go to make improvements.

3 Own your feedback

Use phrases beginning with "I" to show that your thoughts and feelings are your own e.g. *"I am concerned about what you said at the meeting. It would help me if you could tell me more about your thoughts on this so I can understand your perspective."* Don't shift the blame or muddle things by saying *"everyone thinks that you are difficult to work with"* or *"we all know you are a late person"*.

4 Be balanced

When you need to give feedback about something that hasn't gone so well, balance this information with something positive. Some people refer to a 'feedback sandwich' with positive comments to start and finish, with negative aspects addressed in between. Others prefer to get any difficult issues dealt with first so that they can finish by affirming how well other aspects are going. Experiment to find what works for you. If you begin with a positive statement avoid negating what you have just said by following it with *but...* (*"in general everything is fine but..."*)

5 Focus on finding solutions

It's much more energising to have a conversation based on positive solutions, rather than problems. This can be a subtle distinction. Consider the difference between this solution-focused statement: *"To make sure we comply with the national standards we must be sure to involve everyone in risk assessments. Can we discuss ideas about how to get people doing these as part of every project?"* And this problem-focused one: *"If you don't get a risk assessment from everyone we will be in breach of the national standards and could get into a world of trouble."*

6 Seize the moment

Feedback goes wrong if it's not done at the time. Once the moment has passed it is very difficult to give your feedback with the right tone and probably too late for the person to change things. Once everyone is used to feedback it changes the culture of how things are done, which in turn makes it much easier to say *"Can I catch up with you after your demonstration? I'd like to talk about how it went."* So seizing the moment is important, as is giving feedback in one-to-one meetings. You don't have to have negative things to say – it's just as important to tell someone when things are going well.

7 Reach an understanding and follow up after

Receiving feedback is a skill in itself and the person you are speaking to may disagree with your comments. Remain neutral and don't get drawn into an argument or back off altogether; stay specific and give more examples of what you mean. You don't have to fill the silences, hold your tongue and give the person time and space to think. Finally, discuss ways to improve or maintain the situation. Sum up any agreements you've made and thank the person. Write them down so you both have a record – email is useful for this. Don't expect instant change, change can only happen if a person decides to change themselves. Remember that feedback is information for reflection and not an instruction list. Look for opportunities to notice and commend the person for doing things well.

All in all, giving feedback should be a positive thing that gives recognition, support and encouragement. It helps people to develop new skills and continue their professional development on the job. At times there will be difficult conversations to have but timely feedback can prevent problems from escalating or behaviour from becoming endemic. When feedback is given with a positive spirit and a wish for the person to do well it fosters positive working relationships and supports an honest and open workplace.

"A good objective of leadership is to help those who are doing poorly to do well and to help those who are doing well to do even better." Jim Rohn