FEEDBACK

Steps in Giving Effective Feedback

Cultivate a constructive attitude

The most critical starting point in giving effective feedback is to intend to be helpful. You may wish to help the other person, or your motives may be more self-interested: you may wish to help someone perform so that you get your work done. In any event, giving good feedback requires this approach. At times, people give feedback as a means of “getting back” at another. Insults or reprimands are thinly veiled as feedback. It is important to distinguish when we want to punish someone from when we want to engage in effective feedback. The two are not the same.

Focus on specific behavior

Feedback is only useful in changing or maintaining discrete behaviors. Therefore, it is critical to be clear about what behaviors are at issue. Be vigilant at focusing on behaviors rather than personal characteristics. “You are lazy” is not helpful behavioral feedback. However, “You did not complete the task in each of the four check-in points” is helpful behavioral feedback.

Focus on the impact of the behavior

When giving feedback, be sure to describe the effects of the behavior in question. In order for a person to act on feedback, he or she needs to understand the impact of his or her behavior, and, as the giver of feedback, you are in a unique position to provide this information.

There are two kinds of “impact” information—situational and personal. Situational impact information explains what effect the behavior has on the work being conducted. For example, “When you are late to meetings, it causes us to review our agenda, thus wasting important time.” In contrast, personal impact information describes the effect of the behavior on the giver of the feedback. For example, “When you are late to meetings, I feel frustrated and embarrassed. I’m frustrated because I really don’t have a lot of time in my day, and I hate to waste any unnecessarily. I’m embarrassed because I’m your advocate, and I look as though I’m not mentoring you well.
When you behave this way.” When the giver of feedback can provide impact information at both levels, the feedback is more likely to be acted upon.

**Elicit “feedback” feedback**

After giving feedback, reserve time to clarify if the feedback was understood and interpreted by the recipient in the intended way. The giver can simply ask: “Do you understand my feedback?” “Was I clear?” or “What do you hear me saying to you?”

**Establish a dialogue about the feedback**

Finally, the giver should discuss the feedback with the recipient. This discussion provides the recipient with an opportunity to respond to the feedback that can serve to reduce her or his defensiveness if the feedback is constructive.

**Steps in Receiving Effective Feedback**

**Be specific about behavior**

The effective receiving of feedback is in many ways a mirrored process of effective giving. Since a focus on specific behavior is of paramount importance, recipients of feedback can also ask for specificity. If the giver says, “You are lazy,” the recipient can say, “That perception is not as helpful for me in changing as are specific incidents in which you believe I behaved lazily.”

**Be open to feedback**

The most challenging task in receiving feedback is staying open and not becoming defensive in the face of constructive feedback (or too self-effacing in the face of positive feedback). A recipient’s ability to listen reflectively can increase the chances that he or she will be able to hear the feedback that is being offered. One useful tip for doing this is to make a point on not responding to the feedback until the giver has finished (with the exception of asking for behavioral specificity). The giver may be mistaken in interpreting circumstances of your behavior or may be giving feedback that you have heard before. Nevertheless, listen. There will be time to discuss the feedback after you have taken it in.

**Summarize your understanding of the feedback**

After hearing the feedback, the receiver should summarize what he or she heard to make sure there is clear communication of the specific feedback. Don’t interpret; just restate.
Share your reaction to the feedback

As a mirror process to establishing dialogue, the receiver of the feedback should create space to discuss reactions to the feedback. At this point, it is useful to discuss specifics of the situation, extenuating circumstances that may be relevant, or appreciation to the giver for the feedback. Avoid using this as an opportunity to simply be reactively defensive. Ask questions of the giver and endeavor to conclude this step with a “thanks for the feedback.”

Assumptions of the Approach

This simple approach to feedback, while effective in many U.S. social contexts, carries with it two underlying assumptions. First, this approach is relevant only for direct verbal feedback. Feedback can be conveyed in a myriad of ways, and some means of communication are subtle, like a facial expression. In the universe of interpersonal dynamics, these indirect channels of feedback may be perfectly legitimate. However, in settings where verbal interaction is normative, the approach described here may be especially helpful.

A second and related limitation of this approach is that it is culturally embedded (as are many of the interpersonal behavioral approaches we are covering). This may not be the most effective way to offer or receive feedback in non-U.S. cultures. In some cultures, the directness of the approach may be seen as offensive. This may be true in different organizational cultures as well as different national cultures. It is incumbent on the individual to pay attention to and to interpret the environment in which he or she is operating.
Giving and Receiving Feedback Observation Form

Use the form below to help guide your observations of your team as they give, and receive, feedback as assigned in class. This form is intended to be accompanied by the technical note “Feedback” (UVA-OB-0746)

**Instructions:** During the conversation you observe, check the boxes for the steps included and note the apparent impact of having or not having that step in the discussion. You can also make notes in the Impact column about how well that step was done.

| STEPS FOR GIVING FEEDBACK | IMPACT |
|---------------------------|--------|
| ☐ Shows positive intent   |        |
| ☐ Focuses on specific behavior |      |
| ☐ Describes the impact of behavior on others | |
| ☐ Clarifies whether feedback was understood | |
| ☐ Has dialogue about the feedback | |

| STEPS FOR RECEIVING FEEDBACK | IMPACT |
|-----------------------------|--------|
| ☐ Ask for specificity       |        |
| ☐ Shows openness to feedback by listening reflectively | |
| ☐ Summarizes understanding of feedback | |
| ☐ Shares reactions to feedback |  

This form was prepared by Professors Erika Hayes James and James G. Clawson. Copyright © 2009 by the University of Virginia Darden School Foundation, Charlottesville, VA. All rights reserved.