

Giving & Receiving Feedback: Best Practices

In his seminal book, *How to Win Friends & Influence People*, Dale Carnegie set out some fundamental tenets of leadership. The first among them: Don't criticize, condemn or complain. He shared these wise words, "Criticism is futile because it puts a person on the defensive and usually makes him strive to justify himself. Criticism is dangerous because it wounds a person's precious pride, hurts his sense of importance and arouses resentment." Yet, giving positive, helpful feedback to your staff, colleagues, peers and even those in power is an essential leadership skill. Here are some best practices to help you come across as helpful, not hurtful, and potentially bring about lasting performance change.

1. Before you provide someone with feedback, make sure you are the right person to deliver it.

Does the receiver report to you? If not, did he or she solicit your feedback? Did you observe the behavior that needs to be changed or improved yourself? If not, is it possible for the observer to deliver the feedback, or is there some system for providing third-party feedback (such as a 360° assessment, a customer satisfaction survey, etc.)?

2. Earn their trust. People are more willing to take action or make behavioral changes if the feedback is coming from someone that they trust. Trust is built over time. Make sure you are consistently true to your word and are known for speaking honestly. When delivering feedback, use trust-building delivery skills: Look people in the eye when you speak with them, make sure your arms are open (uncrossed) to demonstrate neutrality or approachability, and use facial expressions to convey sympathy and empathy. It should go without saying, but watch the tone of your voice.

3. Deliver SMART feedback. Make sure the feedback is specific. "We expect everyone to arrive 10 minutes early before a big pitch," is better than, "You're always late." Make sure the feedback is actionable and realistic — the person must be able to make a change. And, whenever possible, make the feedback time-bound. "I'd like to see your expense reports submitted on time starting January 1st."

4. Defray emotion by sticking to facts. If the emotional level is very high — you are angry, frustrated, hurt, disappointed — it is helpful to stick to the facts. Present the feedback as pure facts. "I heard you interrupt the customer while he was questioning the quality of the last order." Then, listen. Let the person respond and talk as much as possible. It will help you understand their perspective.

5. Assume positive intent and recognize achievements. Most people aim to please, if for no other reason than it's in our nature to want to be appreciated and feel self-esteem. In addition, the need to "reach one's full potential" sits at the top of Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs, a model of human behavior. Therefore, approach the conversation with the mindset that the person believes they were doing their best with the information they had at the time, or they had a good reason for taking the action they. Begin the conversation with sincere appreciation for something, even if you have to dig deep. Warning: the appreciation must be sincere.

6. Use the “sandwich approach” with caution. Some people like to soften a negative comment by surrounding it with a few positive comments. If you do this routinely, people will see it for what it is; a technique. You will erode their trust and they may discount the positive feedback. If the feedback is provided during a routine performance review, by all means list the positives as well as the opportunities for change. But if the feedback is urgent, for example it is being given to prevent further damage to interpersonal relations or organizational reputation, then don't detract from the seriousness of the situation by burying it.

7. Feedback for positive change is an opportunity, not a criticism. Position negative feedback as an opportunity for growth, because that is what it is. If you don't care enough to see the receiver improve, you are not the right person to deliver the feedback (see #1 above).

8. Give it time. Don't deliver important feedback in a rushed manner. If you observe something that needs to be addressed right away, take a few breaths first. Make sure the setting for delivering the feedback is appropriate, meaning that it is private. Thoughtful, well-meaning feedback is never delivered in an impromptu manner or “snapped out” in the heat of the moment. If you are nearing the end of a performance review and have not covered the most important or serious pieces of feedback, arrange another meeting. The recipient deserves time to process the information and ask questions or for clarification.

9. Never argue or get defensive. At the moment any conversation turns into an argument, call for a break—even if it's just for 5 minutes. This is often enough time to diffuse strong emotions and enable the participants to return to the conversation with a willingness to hear the other point of view.

10. If you are receiving feedback, maintain a neutral and open body posture. (arms unfolded and uncrossed) and maintain eye connection with the speaker. This conveys openness and confidence. If you don't understand the feedback, ask for specific examples. Hold the speaker accountable for providing feedback that you can work with. Do not feel that you should, or need to, respond right away. Always thank the person for the feedback — and mean it. It's an opportunity for you, if not to change, then to understand another person's perspective.

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