

Tips on Giving and Receiving Feedback

What is Feedback all about?

Feedback is about assessing individual performance to determine if:

- performance expectations are being met
- results are being achieved

Ingrid Bens of Participative Dynamics, Toronto, in her book *Facilitating with Ease* states:

“Feedback is always meant to be positive. Its goal is to improve the current situation or performance – its goal is never to criticize or offend. The structure of giving feedback is a reflection of this positive intent.”

She offers the following general principles for providing feedback:

- **Be descriptive rather than evaluative** – tell the other person what you notice or what has happened. Avoid all comments about them as a person.
- **Be specific instead of general** - describe exactly what happened so that facts, not impressions, form the basis of the feedback.
- **Solicit feedback rather than impose it** – ask the other person if you can give them feedback. If they say no, respect that this may not be a good time. Collaborate to determine a more convenient time.
- **Time it** – feedback should be given as soon as possible after the situation being described.
- **Focus on what can change** – make suggestions for improvements that the person is capable of implementing.
- **Check the feedback** – make sure your understanding is accurate and fair. Check with the person or even with others to avoid misjudging the situation.
- **Demonstrate caring** – offer feedback with the positive intent of helping the other person.

“It is never easy to give direct feedback,” says **Bens**, “so use the right language.” She recommends following “The Eight-Step Feedback Process.”

1. *Ask permission to offer feedback*

This is a way of signaling that you intend to give feedback and it allows the other person to tell you if it is a bad time to hear feedback and to pay careful attention to what is being said.

2. *Describe specifically what you are observing*

Give a clear and specific description and avoid generalizing, exaggerating or offering emotional accounts.

3. *Tell them about the direct impact of their action*

Describe the impact on individuals, the program or the department. Keep it objective. Don't get personal. Avoid blaming. Deal with the facts of the current situation.

4. *Give the person an opportunity to explain*

Listen actively; use attentive body language and paraphrase key points.

5. *Draw out ideas from the other person*

Frame the whole thing as a problem to be solved. Get people to offer their own ideas. The more people self-prescribe the better.

6. *Offer specific suggestions for improvement*

Make suggestions that will improve the situation. Wherever possible, build on the ideas suggested by others.

7. *Summarize and express support*

Demoralizing people does not set the stage for improved performance; offering encouragement and ending on an optimistic note does.

8. *Follow-up*

Make sure you end the feedback discussion with clear action steps.

Lynn Gaines, a Human Resources Manager, in an article, *Your Work Stinks!*, Executive Female, May/June 1995, provides the following suggestions:

1. Base your feedback on significant incidents or events related to the employee's performance. Describe the significant incident and provide a step-by-step statement of how the incident should have been handled (e.g. You are always late vs. today you were 30 minutes late, the third time this month).
2. Discuss the significant incident as soon as possible after it occurs. Avoid trying to give feedback in one giant lump. Like a large gulp of ice cream it can be hard to swallow.
3. Give feedback face-to-face and ensure that the venue is private. (Let the saying, "praise in public, punish in private," be your guide.)
4. Avoid giving positive feedback on the run. Do have a brief private meeting and deliver your feedback with a clear, unmixed message. Gaines recommends that we avoid the "hamburger criticism," sandwiching a critical message between two pieces of praise.
5. The guilt that we will destroy someone with words is one of the main reasons that managers avoid criticizing an employee. Gaines takes the position that managers should not let themselves off the hook with excuses. As Ingrid Bens notes, the intent of the feedback should focus on the goal of improving the current situation or performance.
6. You should not, Gaines warns, allow yourself to be manipulated. She recommends that you avoid being cornered into giving feedback that is more positive than you intended.

Receiving Feedback

For **Bens**, the key is how to receive feedback in a non-defensive manner. She shares the following tips:

- ◆ **Listen actively**

Make eye contact with the speaker. Ask probing questions to make sure you understand what is being said.

- ◆ **Don't get emotional**

Breathe deeply. Sit back. Adopt a relaxed body posture. Lower your voice. Speak slowly.

- ◆ **Don't get defensive**

This is not aimed at you personally. Understand the other person's perspective before presenting your side of the story. Ask for more details on points you don't agree with.

- ◆ **Accept the input**

Even when you don't agree with all of it, there will be some good ideas – accept them. This shows respect for the other person's perspective.

- ◆ **Work to improve**

Devote your energy to finding improvement rather than disputing observations. Don't put the burden of solutions to the other person. Offer ideas of your own.