

Giving Feedback: Do's and Don'ts

1. *DO let the learner go first: Ask learners to assess their overall performance first in a general sense ('So, how do you think things went?') and then specifically regarding the stated goals and objectives before you offer any feedback. Assume that you may not have the full story regarding a learner's performance. Ask learners for their comments first to get an idea of their self-perception and other factors in the performance that are not observable.
2. *DO use feedback language that is descriptive and non-evaluative: It should not be interpretive or assume anything, e.g., simply state that the learner is consistently late for rounds instead of disparaging him for lateness. Ensure that your feedback is more meaningful than simply making the learner feel good (e.g., simply saying, "you're doing a wonderful job" does not reinforce any of the learner's specific behaviors. "You measured the patient's liver span accurately," however, is a specific, meaningful description which reinforces behavior).
3. *DO use "I" when giving subjective feedback: Such as, "I can relate to your problem in this area" or "I remember doing the very same thing" or "I thought you seemed distracted - what did you think?" as opposed to "You were really out in left field"
4. *DO limit feedback quantity: Provide information that is limited to the most important issues so as not to inundate the learner with information. The amount of information should also depend on the level of the learner (e.g., new learner vs. seasoned learner).
5. *DO consider giving feedback in a sandwich format: For example, reinforcing-corrective-reinforcing (e.g., "I thought that the way you related to the patient through your body language and tone of voice was terrific" [reinforcing]. " I do feel that your family history was superficial in that you didn't inquire about any significant illnesses" [corrective]. "Overall, I was impressed with the detail of your physical examination" [reinforcing]). Not everyone agrees with this format, but everyone does agree that during every feedback session you should give the learner some reinforcing as well as corrective feedback - catch the learner doing something right!
6. *DON'T give futile feedback: Don't give feedback if behavior change can't occur (e.g., "Stop stuttering!").
7. *DON'T focus on the actor, focus on the action: Avoid focusing on personality traits unless they are manifested behaviors that can be observed/reviewed - look at the action, not the actor. Relate to learners how their behavior affected the patient rather than criticizing their personalities (e.g., don't say, "you come across as hostile;" do say, "I thought the patient shied away from you - what do you think?")
8. *DON'T give feedback at bad times: For example, when the learner has just come off call or is emotionally charged.
9. *DON'T press if the learner seems threatened: "Back off" and listen to the learner if you sense the learner feeling threatened or defensive. Continuing without doing this will impede learning and disrupt trust.
10. DO make feedback an interactive experience: The learner should take responsibility for confirming what she has been told and offering suggestions on how to improve his/her performance.

The 4-1-1 On Constructive Criticism

Being critical is easy, and offering criticism seems easier still. Yet constructive criticism - the more refined and effective brand of critical feedback - is like an art when compared to nagging, nit-picking and negativity. Nothing makes most people bristle more quickly than unfair, unskillful, or unsolicited criticism. Yet there are times when offering constructively critical feedback is essential to maintaining excellence and strong relationships.

The best way to skillfully offer constructive criticism depends heavily on the nature of the relationships and personalities in any given situation, so this article will offer a few pointers rather than an exhaustive primer on the subject. Yet a few tips on how to be more skillful - - if implemented mindfully - can make an enormous difference. Some tips include:

Realize that relationships matter

Is a husband criticizing a wife, an employer criticizing an employee, a supervisor criticizing a direct report, a project leader criticizing a team member, or a colleague criticizing a peer? Some approaches for offering constructive criticism can be applied in all cases, and in all cases success depends on the agreements that are in place - and understood by both parties. For example, an employer providing a critique of an employee's performance rests on a foundation of the agreements made at the start of the employment relationship about the employee's role and the employer's expectations. A colleague criticizing a coworker can require a more delicate approach, because the same assumptions regarding authority are not in place. Also, remember that one of the most important priorities is to maintain a positive, respectful relationship with the person once the discussion has drawn to a close!

Review assumptions

Most people automatically assume that they're right and everyone else is wrong, and it's their mission in life to correct others! From the other side of the discussion, though, it seems a lot more like unproductive, demotivating criticism. One great thing to do before you lob criticism at someone else is to review where you might be making assumptions about the relationship, expectations or how the person is approaching a project or situation. For example, if you're about to criticize someone for "never listening," your assumptions might include your perception that you've been clear in your communication or seeing expectations from the same place. In fact, neither may be true. Scouting potential assumptions can help set the foundation for a more positive discussion or feedback-sharing session.

Relax and center before meeting

If we're anxious about providing critical feedback, or feeling frustrated or resentful about another person's behavior or performance, we might be tempted to head into a feedback-sharing discussion in a state of stress. The better choice is, after reviewing tips like these to put the discussion in proper perspective, is to take a few minutes to relax, breathe slowly and deeply, remember our highest intentions for the meeting and for sharing our feedback. Whether you say a prayer or borrow a few relaxation or mindset management tips from your favorite athlete or self-help book, making an effort to relax and center will make a positive difference in the tone of your meeting, and you'll be more likely to be skillful rather than reactionary in your discussion.

Share intentions

Before offering criticism, check your own intentions for wanting to let someone else know what they've done wrong or what could be refined in their behavior or performance. This provides a good litmus test for whether the issue under critique is really a matter of preference, work style or worse, your own problem. Then preface your criticism by sharing your intentions. For example, you might say, "My intention for wanting to talk with you is that I want our group's work to be excellent, and something we can all be proud of." or "My intention for needing to say this is that I'm feeling very frustrated that I might be getting taken advantage of here, and it's important for me that we maintain a positive working relationship."

Clarify expectations

Murky or unvoiced expectations create problems when it's time to provide feedback, including constructive criticism, of someone else's behavior or performance. In addition to sharing your intentions for the discussion, you might want to share your perspective on how you understand any working agreements or your own expectations for the situation or the other person's performance or behavior. Doing so might sound something like, "My understanding of the project is that you were going to be handling meeting logistics by Friday afternoon and forward that information to me."

Ask questions (and listen to the responses)

Another great way to collect information that will help you to unveil unclear expectations, misperceptions or lack of clarity is to ask questions. The opposite, of course, is just doing all of the talking (which comes perilously close to assuming that you're correct in your perception of the situation!). Before providing constructive feedback, it would be great to ask questions and learn more about how the other person understood his role and assignments, how they understand any agreements, what they thought you or others expected of him, and how he felt about his performance on those contributions to date. Often, as you listen to someone's responses to questions, you have at least one "Aha!" moment that enriches your own understanding, which then allows you to provide much more constructive feedback.

Speak respectfully

Think about it: Nothing seems worse than being yelled out, scolded, or just "talked at." And all of those seem even less constructive if you feel that what's coming at you is biased, inaccurate or unfair, and that you've not been offered a chance to share your perspective on the matter (and felt like someone actually listened!). In any discussion, and particularly one where you'll be offering criticism, it's important to listen, to ask questions, to ensure that you've made clear that what you're sharing is your perspective rather than a judgment or indictment of the other person. It's much nicer to participate in an information-sharing dialogue - where both people get to speak and listen - than it is to feel like you're before the Inquisition!

See the positive as well as the negative

Studies show that many people feel criticized, bullied or ostracized more than appreciated at work, and a fair percentage of people leave their place of employment because of such interpersonal problems with supervisors or colleagues. One great practice is to, before your meeting where you'll be providing feedback to coworkers (including managers or persons you supervise), is to make a list of things that you really appreciate about the individual with whom you'll be sharing feedback. Remember - positive attributes only, and include at least five on your list. Then, once you've shared your intentions about the meeting, share the "what I really appreciate about you and your work" list before moving on to constructive criticism. You can also wrap the meeting with a recap of positive thoughts.

These are just a few of the things to consider before providing critical feedback to another person, and the tips can be "flipped" if you're the one receiving critical feedback!

This information provides food for thought rather than counsel specifically designed to meet the needs of your organization. Please use it mindfully. The most effective leadership, interpersonal and organizational communication plans are those that have been tailored to meet your unique needs and organizational culture, so don't hesitate to contact us or get assistance from a qualified adviser.

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Annotated Bibliography

Davies D and Jacobs A. 'Sandwiching' complex with interpersonal feedback. *Small Group Behavior* 16: 387-396, 1985.

This study sought to determine whether predominantly positive feedback combinations would result in a greater benefit to the recipient than predominantly negative feedback combinations. Specifically, the study looked at the "sandwich," a combination in which a critical statement is embedded between two complimentary items of feedback (positive-negative-positive). Other combinations studied were positive-positive-negative, negative-positive-negative and negative-negative-positive. Undergraduate psychology students in the Netherlands rated their experiences in a group training session with the various feedback combinations. The students rated accuracy, desirability and emotional reaction higher when the combinations were mostly positive. The sandwich combination (positive-negative-positive) was the most highly rated.

Ende J. Feedback in clinical medical education. *JAMA* 250: 777-781, 1983.

This article gives guidelines for offering feedback, derived from the literature of business administration, psychology, and education. The author has adapted them for use by teachers and students of medical education and put them in a table for easy application to clinical teaching situations. The author also identifies the difference between evaluation and feedback and appropriate situations for using each. This is the most quoted article in medical education literature. If you read nothing else, read this! (This article is reprinted in its entirety at the end of this Readings section.)

Evans D, Hearn M, Uhlemann M and Ivey A. *Essential Interviewing: A Programmed Approach to Effective Communication*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1993.

This book is a self-teaching tool. It defines core communication skills necessary for effective interviewing and feedback sessions, and then provides a number of exercises so that the reader may "practice" the skills. The book is designed using programmed instruction techniques, which means that the reader is carried through a series of activities where you are asked to identify the correct response, action or skill needed. Each possible response is discussed as to its appropriateness. Chapter topics include "effective inquiry," "reflecting content," "information giving," and "enlisting cooperation."

Gil DA, Heins M and Jones PB. Perceptions of medical school faculty members and students on clinical clerkship feedback. *J Medical Education* 59: 856-864, 1984.

The purpose of this article was to identify both the perceptions of faculty members on how well they gave feedback and the perceptions of students on how effective the feedback was that they received. A total of 82 fourth year medical students and 142 clinical instructors completed a questionnaire about the following eight categories of feedback: reciprocity, timing, use of firsthand data, identification of remedial behaviors, descriptiveness, offering subjective data, and dealing with decisions and actions. Results show that both faculty members and students perceived six of the eight feedback categories as equally important. However, faculty ratings on how well they gave feedback were higher than student ratings of the feedback that they received from faculty.

Hewson MA and Little ML. Giving feedback in medical education. *J Gen Int Med*. 13: 11-116, 1998.

The authors first compare unsubstantiated recommendations for giving feedback (taken from the literature) to learners' perceptions of effective feedback. Sixty-three participants differentiated helpful from unhelpful feedback from their personal experiences. Helpful feedback was characterized as focusing on specific content and exhibiting sensitivity to the receiver. Unhelpful feedback was characterized as being too general and/or judgmental. These learners' perceptions were consistent with recommendations from the literature. The authors then provide a model for giving feedback that focuses on major principles that recipients value. (This article is reprinted in its entirety at the end of this Readings section.)

Longmaid III HE and Rider EA. Feedback and performance improvement in clinical medical education. *JAMA* 274: 996n, 1995.

Rider EA and Longmaid III HE. Feedback in clinical medical education: guidelines for learners on receiving feedback. *JAMA* 274: 938i, 1995.

Rider EA and Longmaid III HE. Giving constructive feedback. *JAMA* 274: 867f, 1995.

This three title series of one-page summaries addresses different aspects of teacher-learner roles in the feedback mechanism. The summaries include specific guidelines for both givers and receivers of feedback.