Effective Feedback

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How is feedback different from evaluation or advice? Frequently these are all seen as very similar, if not synonymous. One potentially useful definition: feedback is "information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal." Some feedback is more useful than others.

Although sometimes evaluation (*e.g.*, scores, grades, praise) or advice (what to do) fit the definition, most of the time they do not. "Good job" or "You failed" are evaluations but not necessarily useful feedback. Similarly, "You need to practice more" is advice but not useful feedback.

Models of Feedback Delivery

"*Feedback Sandwich*" = Start with something positive (bread), followed by the criticism or "tough" feedback (meat), and end with something else positive (bread).

> A classic framework that has been criticized (and frequently abandoned). *Why?*

- If you have to get "creative" to come up with positives, they're likely to be seen as insincere and patronizing (and recipients may feel they are being manipulated).
- Because of its ubiquity, recipients tend to now recognize the sandwich and may discount the "obligatory" positives and focus on criticism (and perhaps feel it is gimmicky).
- The 2 positives may dilute the relative seriousness of the one criticism.

Newer (Inquiry-Based) Model:

1) **Ask** how the person thought he/she did: *"Tell me how you thought you did and why?"*
2) **Share** your observations and assessment: *"I thought you did _____ based on _____"*
3) **Plan** next steps needed to improve. *"What do you need to do next to . . .?"*

- Fosters Dialogue, Collaboration, and Meta-Cognitive Skills (*i.e.*, the ability to reflect on and evaluate one's own performance; all useful skills for future improvement)

Characteristics of Effective Feedback

Timing: Provide feedback as soon after the behavior as reasonably possible. Frequently there is the temptation to let slightly problematic behavior slide, assuming it won't happen again, or "it's no big deal." It's better to address such issues early. When addressed after multiple instances of the same problematic behavior, you likely will have less patience and have made more negative assumptions about the other person. Also, the other person may rightfully wonder, "Why didn't you bring this up earlier?," and feel resentful or indignant as a result.

Intention: The most effective feedback originates from a genuine interest in the other person's development and wellbeing, within an ongoing positive relationship. So, tend to the relationship; a

supportive relationship allows for receipt of critical feedback in less defensive and more useful ways. Check your own motives for providing feedback. How do you feel about this person? Even within a positive relationship, feedback often feels like criticism, so speak to the positive intent you have in providing difficult feedback. Also, when possible, include specifically how your feedback may help the other person achieve some desired goal.   What's in it for the recipient?

> *"I'd like to provide some feedback that I hope would help you be even more effective at . . ."*
> *"I have very high standards, but I provide this feedback because I believe you can achieve."*

Actionability: Is your feedback "actionable"? Be sure the recipient knows what improvement (or continuation) of particular behaviors would "look like." Will there by an opportunity for the recipient to demonstrate improvement and receive follow-up feedback? Work with the recipient to construct a plan for improvement, practice, and subsequent feedback.

Collaboration: Feedback should be a collaborative discussion. We can't change another person, and often the more forcefully we try the less likely such change will occur. The purpose of feedback is to encourage a conversation around problem solving. So, make this point explicitly and then reinforce it through your behavior. Be *curious* as to the other person's perspective. Ask what the other person hears you saying. Clarify your meaning and intent. Encourage reflection on the part of the recipient. Ask how you might be of help in whatever next steps the other person chooses.

Focus: Be direct rather than trying to soften critical feedback with fluff. Also, resist temptation to tackle multiple problematic issues at once. When the recipient's defenses pop up, it is unlikely much more will be heard accurately after that point. Stay focused on the one issue at hand, working through the steps to bring resolution and closure. Save other issues that need to be addressed for subsequent feedback, even if the break between is a matter or minutes or hours.

Objectivity: Start with observable facts and behavior (which may include speech, body language). Next share your interpretation or subjective reactions to that behavior. The point is to keep the two separate, reminding both parties that the behavior may have more than one interpretation or elicit different reactions across individuals. Also, focus on one point at a time, making sure it is fully processed and resolved before moving on to the next feedback focus.

Framing: "*I* statements" (vs. "*You* statements") elicit less defensiveness (e.g., "*I was concerned when . . .*" or "*I would like to see you improve by . . .*"). Statements that start with "You" frequently come with baggage related to being accused or criticized when statements started that way before. As a result, "you" tends to result in trying to make a case for why that criticism is not true.

Vocal Tone: Research has demonstrated that people are less likely to respond with defensiveness when critical feedback is delivered with a positive tone of voice (positive, but appropriate).

Credibility: Is your feedback based on sufficient data you observed or experienced directly? Have you demonstrated understanding of the context for those data? Do you successfully role model what you are advising the other person to do? If not, your feedback may be undercut by the recipient's judgment of hypocricy.

Emotional Impact: If the feedback is especially critical in nature, the emotional response of the recipient may impair processing of the feedback toward the goal of improvement. After providing the feedback, ask about the emotional impact and address it accordingly. For example, acknowledge that that negative feedback is difficult to hear, the problem is correctable, that your feedback is based on behavior and not a judgment of the recipient as a person/professional, etc.

Helpful Assumptions: Do you tend to assume that the skills or abilities about which you're providing feedback are something a person either "has" or doesn't? That assumption tends to leak through in feedback, and is demotivating. Even if you communicate that this person has the ability or skill, there may be fear to exercise that skill or ability, fail, and thus demonstrate that the individual doesn't "have it" afterall. Instead, if you believe that the skill or ability is learnable, you are more likely to reinforce (and motivate) effort and practice rather than achievement per se.

Rehearsal and Practice: Providing optimal feedback gets easier with practice. Also, because it is difficult to predict how feedback will be received, anticipating various reactions and your responses will help prevent being caught off guard. Think through and plan before feedback delivery.

Role Modeling: Serve as an ongoing example of how to respond to feedback professionally and productively. Ask for feedback frequently, avoid defensiveness in response, and thank others who provide you feedback (especially when critical). Do what you can to promote a "feedback-rich environment," and remember that your actions (and reactions) speak louder than your words.

Strategies for Handling Resistance to Feedback

Sometimes it's important to provide feedback <u>on how someone appears to respond to feedback</u>. In these cases, all of the advice regarding effective feedback applies. Additionally, you might consider:

Clarify Expectations: When your professional role dictates that you provide feedback, recipients may understand your role, but not necessarily their roles. That is, some individuals may not recognize that their expected role in the process is to respond to the feedback professionally and with intent toward self-improvement. Explain your expectations for the individual's role in receiving feedback, and how the individual's apparent resistance affects you and others in the setting.

Remain Curious: It's easy to assume that the others see their own behavior as you see it ("They must know how terrible that is!"). Instead, share your perceptions and interpretations, and ask how the other person's views compare. Investigate with the goal of understanding their perspective.

Normalize the Experience: Normalize that it is common to experience difficulty when faced with critical feedback. If you can, relate a story from your own such experience, and what you learned.

Negotiate a Commitment: Establish actionable goals toward which the other person agrees to work. Agree that you will provide frequent follow-up feedback and continue to collaborate toward achievement of the agreed-upon goal. When even small improvements are apparent, reinforce them with genuine acknowledgement. View that person's success as jointly earned.

Ask for Feedback on How You Provide Feedback: Here the goal is to learn how to better provide feedback that will have the intended results, but it also provides an opportunity to model how to professionally and productively respond to feedback (see advice below on receiving feedback).

Strategies for Receiving Feedback

Cultivate a Growth Mindset: Improvement requires a continuous cycle of effort and feedback. It's nice to master something during the first attempt, but highly unrealistic. Performing less than perfectly (or even adequately) is the norm and does not indicate a lack of ability to achieve mastery.

Be Gracious: Some rare individuals view all feedback as a gift. These people are invested in self-improvement, and feedback is a necessary ingredient that can only come from others who risk providing it. Regardless of the intent or accuracy of the feedback, it tells you something about how this other person views your behavior. That alone can be valuable information if a goal is improvement of the impressions you make on others (and thus how they respond to you).

Be Vigilant About Defensiveness: Because feedback naturally feels like criticism, especially when not delivered well, it's natural to feel defensive and react by attempting to explain yourself or discounting the feedback offered. Resist the urge to respond beyond, "Thank you. You've given me something to think about." Reflect later, looking for something to learn after cooing off.

Remain Curious: Ask questions for clarification, especially about the meaning of particular summary words or phrases. Play the role of investigative interviewer rather than defender. Unpack the meaning of terms and concepts used. Repeat back what you hear to ensure accuracy (your emotional reaction is liable to distort the interpretations you make as to the feedback provider's intent). Resist asking questions that are more defensive than they are inquisitive.

Request Limits If Needed: If you feel yourself responding emotionally, or feeling overwhelmed, the feedback is likely to be less helpful. In that case it's better to ask for an opportunity to think about what has been provided up to that point, and perhaps schedule a an additional meeting to continue.

Ask: Feedback is risky for the provider because it's easy to offend the recipient and potentially cause conflict. If you truly desire useful feedback, its important to ask, frequently, and to be as specific as possible regarding what you'd like feedback about (particular behaviors, contexts). When you receive feedback it's just as important to be grateful and resist any signs of defensiveness, which would likely prevent future feedback.

Resources

Creating a Feedback-Rich Environment: https://stanford.io/1Cp8YYL

Addressing Resistance to Feedback: https://bit.ly/1ldBavu

Factors Influencing Responsiveness to Feedback: https://bit.ly/2qMVIQb

The Do's, Don'ts and Don't Knows of Feedback for Clinical Education: https://bit.ly/2vpRVxI

A One-Page Graphic for Effective Feedback: https://bit.ly/2JRzipq   rev 7/18