

The Neglected Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback

By Sonny Iqbal



The ability to give and receive feedback is a fundamental leadership skill. Feedback improves outcomes and results, motivates performance, brings groups together, clarifies goals and objectives, clears outstanding issues and inspires development.

But despite its importance, too few people approach giving and receiving feedback as a skill to be mastered. As a result, giving feedback becomes an arduous task, delayed or forgotten until the moment has passed and we have lost an invaluable opportunity to share our thoughts in a mature, meaningful way. And our inadequate handling of feedback extends to positive situations. How often do we let noteworthy performance pass by without comment or fail to celebrate accomplishment in others? Both the positive and the negative are lost opportunities for us to learn, improve and transform.

Why does this happen? I find there are several consistent reasons. When giving feedback, the most common trap is to be judgmental in expressing ourselves: “Your presentations simply aren’t up to standard.” This approach assumes a lack of goodwill from the other person and will only make him or her feel attacked. There is no opportunity for a constructive dialogue, let alone positive change.

Focusing on specific actions rather than on overall performance or the character of the person allows feedback to be offered in an objective, thoughtful way: “I feel the presentation you gave to the executive committee didn’t come off as impactfully as it could have. Can we talk about another way it could have been done?” This approach opens the door for the recipient to develop and engage. But to do so, one must avoid getting on a soapbox.

Giving feedback requires careful listening and attention to the recipient’s state of mind and his or her body language. Therefore, another pitfall is poor timing or an inappropriate setting. There is no one right answer here; it depends on the situation and who is on the receiving end. Sometimes “in the moment” works better than afterward, and sometimes the reverse is true. Either way, be sensitive to timing and the appropriateness of the occasion. Prepare thoughtfully and never treat giving feedback as just a chore to be endured.

Finally, it is important to be truthful even while being positive and diplomatic. When the person giving feedback neglects raising certain issues for fear of hurting the recipient’s feelings, what isn’t being said often comes out anyway—and usually in an uncontrolled or unplanned manner. The conversation can then quickly become emotional, causing us to react in the heat of the moment. These situations rarely end well.

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Feedback must reinforce desired behaviors and resolve snags or complications. After a feedback session, the recipient should feel encouraged to think positively about changing behaviors and be motivated to learn how to do things differently. Good feedback also should lead to improved relationships, regardless of the direction in which it flows or the relative rank of the giver or the recipient.

Receiving feedback is an art. Most of us, whether we know it or not, have established mechanisms to filter the feedback we are given, blocking out what we don't want to hear. I know that I have had to learn how to lower the defensive shield. It's taken time and effort—and some discomfort as well. I have found that the first step is to listen carefully and to resist the urge to respond, justify or defend. Always respond rationally and try to prevent the heart from overriding the head. If emotions begin to take over, take a two-minute break. Ask for concrete examples and instances. The chances are high that there is truth to what is being said. Defending or ignoring it will not help us change or transform.

The important next step for the recipient is to create an action plan based on feedback. I have seen people work with the feedback giver, another colleague or a friend to help make sure the appropriate actions are taken. Even a spouse or partner can help set a game plan in motion. Top managers usually are excellent at acting on feedback. For them, engagement is a two-way street, and they are curious to learn and eager to keep developing based on what they hear.

For both the giver and the recipient, trust is essential—whether dictated by the chain of command or earned by actions. Without a foundation of trust, feedback is unlikely to succeed. With it, feedback can be a powerful tool for developing individuals, relationships and organizations.

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