



A Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback

Introduction

This guide provides tips on giving and receiving feedback. It is written with the Goddard Supervisor Feedback process in mind, where the feedback receiver would be one's supervisor. But these ideas would be helpful for feedback in other contexts as well.

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The Purpose of Feedback

For supervisors to improve and make appropriate decisions concerning their behavior and management practices, they need **accurate information** about how their employees currently see them functioning. As in guided missile systems, **feedback allows people to check how "on target" their actions and behavior are** and thus enables them to modify or correct their actions.

Feedback is communication from others that presents data to a person about what the others are experiencing and how this is impacting upon them.

Given this feedback, a new awareness is created within the receiver. It is **up to the receiver** to decide what he or she learns from the feedback and what he or she chooses to do with that knowledge.

When giving or receiving feedback, it's essential to remember that that what people are *experiencing* does not necessarily make it *true* that it happened that way. **Perceptions** are very important **data** – but not necessarily **reality**.

Giving Constructive Feedback

For feedback to be most useful, it must be presented in such a way that the receiver **does not feel threatened or attacked** by the information. Listed below are some guidelines for giving constructive feedback:

- **Direct feedback toward behavior one can do something about, not the person.** Information about what a person *does* helps that person make choices about that behavior. On other hand, assessments about a person's "personality traits" or "personal qualities" usually increase their defensiveness. (E.g., "You arrived ten minutes late" vs. "You're irresponsible.")

- **Take the needs of the receiver into account first.**
Focus the feedback on the value and usefulness it may provide to the receiver rather than the "release" it provides the giver, i.e., you.
- **Make use of "I" Statements** to let the receiver know how *you* perceive, experience or feel about the behavior. Avoid "we" or "most people" statements. By saying, "I get upset when you..." you help promote a productive dialogue. No one can dispute that that's how you feel! Whereas saying "You make me upset" is more likely to lead to an argument and less communication.
- **Focus on what was said and done (actions) rather than why it was said or done (motives).**
Feedback that relates to what, how, when, and where is based on observable events; while opinions or judgments about the other's motive or intent relates to interpretations and conclusions drawn from what was observed.
- **Make feedback descriptive rather than evaluative and judgmental.**
By giving an objective description of what occurred and *your* reactions to the situation, you leave the receiver free to use the feedback as he/she sees appropriate. Being judgmental entails a subjective evaluation of the other based on your personal values.
- **Make feedback specific rather than general and abstract.**
Feedback is generally more useful if it can be tied to a specific time, place and action. It is far more useful to say, "I noticed that you broke in twice while I was speaking during the meeting" than "You are always interrupting people." Give examples.
- **Share information rather than give advice.**
To give advice takes away a person's freedom of choice as well as responsibility for future actions.
- **Be sensitive to timing and selection.**
It is important that the giver of feedback be sensitive to both when it is appropriate to give feedback and how much to give the receiver. The receiver needs to be ready to hear and deal with the data. Only give an amount a person can use.
- **Check whether the receiver understood your feedback.**
One way of doing this is to ask the receiver to rephrase the feedback to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind.
- **Request what you'd like them to do differently.**
Your request let's them know exactly what you are asking them to do. They are free to accept, decline, or counter-propose. You can't change them, but by asking you help them see what you think they could do to help the organization.

Receiving and Responding to Feedback Constructively

- **Accept and Manage Your Emotions**

Most people tend to react to constructive feedback, especially if it is feedback they don't particularly like, with a little surprise or shock, quickly followed by anger and then rejection or denial. We're all humans in here! Observe your emotions and give yourself time to let them move through you. Talk with someone about your feelings, if that helps you. After denial, we usually shift into acceptance and even contentment. Don't try to respond to the feedback giver until your "fight or flight" response has settled down!

- **Reflect on the Feedback**

Take time to analyze the feedback and determine what you think it means for you.

- **Talk With the Feedback Giver(s)**

Talking with the person(s) who gave you feedback is the most important part of the process. This is because feedback is part of building and maintaining healthy working *relationships*. By showing the feedback giver(s) that you care about their perceptions and needs and that you're committed to making changes that help them do their work better, you'll do a lot to strengthen the trust, respect, and confidence in your relationship with them.

- Tell the feedback giver(s) that **you'd like to discuss their feedback with them**. Set a time and place, and follow through.
- **Demonstrate your openness** by sharing your feedback results with your workgroup as well as your interpretation of what the data means to you. This will help open the lines of communication between you and your workgroup.
- Show them that you are **interested in listening to whatever they want to say**. Below are four responses to feedback that demonstrate you are listening:
 - **Paraphrase**: After listening carefully to a person, paraphrase or summarize their ideas in your own words.
 - **Summarize**: Restate in a succinct fashion the information you gathered. This is used to confirm a shared understanding of what has been said or decided. It gives a feeling of closure to a conversation.
 - **Ask Open-ended Questions**: Open-ended questions usually begin with words like: What, Who, Where, When, and How and are difficult to answer with a simple "yes" or "no" response. E.g., "What do you think about that?" Open-ended questions indicate your interest in learning more about the issues, ideas, and reasoning that are important to the feedback giver(s). Avoid asking "why" type questions that can put a person on the spot, e.g., "Why do you think that way?"
 - **Use Silence**: Wait for the other person to respond and finish talking. Then pause rather than respond right away. These pauses are not intended to be embarrassing. By not filling the vacuum, you let the other person know you are listening and are interested in what he/she is saying and that you are making space for more.

- **Listen for understanding** and information, without thinking about your response. Avoid countering, judging or evaluating what is being said. “Seek first to understand, then to be understood” (Stephen R. Covey).
 - **Don’t try to read minds.** A lot of our anxiety comes from what we read into things and not from what people actually say. Your goal is to remain unaffected by the criticism directed at you so that you can discover what needs to be done to improve the situation.
 - **Admit ignorance or confusion** when you do not understand what is being said or are somewhat confused. Nothing is gained if you don’t understand what is being said and do nothing about it. You gain people’s respect by being “big enough” to admit that you are not quite on top of the conversation.
 - **Avoid getting defensive.** If others attack or criticize you or your actions, calmly acknowledge the possibility that there may be some truth in the criticism or their point of view. This allows you to receive any criticism without becoming anxious or defensive. Yet, it still allows you to be the final judge of what you are going to do next.
- **If You Believe You Were In Error, Admit It.**
If a problem was caused by you or by something you said or did, admit it and move on. Don’t get defensive over something that you did or something that did not work out as you expected. By stating your errors you will be able to recognize and accept your errors as errors, and once you accept the error, you can move forward, rather than becoming bogged down in self-criticism. At the same time, don’t be overly apologetic. Treat it as another learning experience.
 - **Find Out What Changes On Your Part Would Most Help The Feedback Giver(s) Be More Effective In Their Work.**
Be sure to get clear from the givers exactly what they are asking you to do differently. If there are several things, ask them which are the most important.
 - **Consider What Changes You Will Commit To**
After you’ve taken in the feedback and become more aware, it’s up to you to choose what action you will take – if any. You will be more likely to follow through if
 - You select only a few changes (up to three)
 - You select changes you believe are in the interests of your
 - You genuinely want to make them.
 - **Commit Yourself to Specific Actions by Specific Dates**
The most powerful action you can take to strengthen an atmosphere of trust and confidence in your workgroup is to make your commitment publicly to your workgroup, and then demonstrate that you have fulfilled it.