

Giving Good Feedback



Giving feedback is first of all an attitude and can only be made a habit by constant practice.

BY PETER MCLAUGHLIN

About the Author

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I LOVE MY JOB EXCEPT FOR TWO TIMES A YEAR WHEN I

have to review my eight direct reports. Do these words sound familiar? If you are like most managers, you would prefer to just do the “real work” and leave it to the employees to figure out how their performance stands. Guess what? This is your “real work.” Feedback is about getting all employees to perform at their best. Simple logic says that eight people performing at their best enhances company productivity far more than one person performing at his or her best.

The problem, according to most managers, is that the education and training on how to give feedback in most companies is woeful and inadequate. In addition to the poor training, the problem is exacerbated by the fact that there are four levels of generations now working in most companies: the Millennium group, Gen-Ys, Gen-Xers, and Baby Boomers—four generations working side by side, all of whom receive feedback with different mindsets.

Numerous studies have shown that exceptional companies have higher levels of feedback and debate than mediocre companies. Unfortunately, the stark reality is that most people aren't very good at giving or receiving feedback. This applies both to positive feedback (praise, thanks, recognition) as well as negative or critical feedback (confronting poor performance). Many people could count on one hand the number of meaningful conversations they've had with their manager about their performance and personal development.

Why does feedback get the short end of the stick? The first answer is that people think they are too busy to spend time on it. The second answer is that feedback territory is fraught with emotional snares and pitfalls. Whether in a formal performance review or an informal conversation in the hallway, you have to possess a rare balance of candor and sensitivity to tackle difficult issues with a subordinate or

co-worker.

When receiving feedback, you have to endure judgmental conversations that may feel like personal attacks.

But feedback conversations are essential. They force you to face reality, confront the problems that are causing your team to under perform, and rise out of the swampland to a higher level of productivity—and a more enjoyable work environment. With learning and practice, you can turn your feedback conversations into productive dialogue that promotes strong relationships and great results, rather than destructive discussions that lead to mediocrity and frustration. Don't say that you're too busy to give and receive feedback—as former Intel CEO Andy Grove says, “It's one of the highest leverage activities you can perform.”

Here are seven tips on how to make your feedback experiences the most effective they can be...and something you actually look forward to.

Giving Feedback

1. Ask Permission to Give Feedback

You will not believe the difference in the level of conversation when you ask permission. Asking permission to give feedback sets a positive framework on a situation that could be perceived as negative. “Can I have permission to give you some feedback?” “I have a couple ideas...can I share them with you?” “Do you mind if I give you a suggestion on how to...?” These are just a few examples.

2. Set a Tone of Energy and Optimism

Consciously assume an attitude that embraces both candor and sensitivity.

If it's going to be a difficult conversation, plan for it by gathering all the necessary information and rehearsing what you want to communicate. If you go into a feedback session ready to yell at someone, he or she is just going to get defensive. Keep the energy in the room positive, and you will see a much better response.

3. Focus on Specifics

When sharing feedback, focus on specific situations and behavior rather than delving into psychoanalysis. Talk to your direct reports or co-workers about how their decisions affect other people, and how their actions affect business results.

4. Show Appreciation and Say Thank-You

Yes, your colleagues and employees are adults who get paid to do their jobs, but to believe that expressing praise isn't important is to vastly underestimate the human craving for appreciation. Let them know you value their time as well as their willingness to listen to your feedback.

5. Confront Nonperformance

Don't wait for the yearly review to tackle this issue. Nonperformance is something that needs to be confronted as soon as possible. Take a hard look at reality together, and make it clear that change is necessary. Get them talking about how they intend to improve. Agree on outcomes and timelines. Set different consequences for different levels of performance.

6. Remember It's a Dialogue, Not a Monologue

Ask questions and listen attentively to answers. Offer suggestions and support. Jointly consider options. Pay attention to the unique talents of those you're giving feedback to, and if possible, frame solutions that leverage their strengths.

7. Encourage and Energize

Get excited about the changes your direct reports can make. Give them examples of how they can improve and show that you're supportive of them making these changes for the better. Some feedback discussions won't turn out to be fun encounters. But if managed skillfully, the majority of feedback conversations can leave people feeling fired up...rather than beaten up.

Giving feedback is first of all an attitude and can only be made a habit by constant practice. "The worst harm you can do," Jack Welch says in his book, *Winning*, "is not to be candid with someone else." **CM**

Self-Assessment on Giving Feedback

Answer the questions by circling the number that represents the best response. Then total circled numbers for your results.

Feedback Self-Assessment					
		Strongly Disagree			Strongly Agree
1	I schedule formal feedback sessions four times per year.	1	2	3	4 5
2	I prepare the content of my feedback with notes and specifics.	1	2	3	4 5
3	I think about the context of the meeting, e.g., the place we will meet as well as the emotional makeup of the feedback participant.	1	2	3	4 5
4	I'm pretty good about checking my emotions before hallway conversations.	1	2	3	4 5
5	I frequently ask if my feedback was satisfactory and helpful.	1	2	3	4 5
6	I ask permission to give feedback.	1	2	3	4 5
7	My feedback is focused on future performance though based on the past.	1	2	3	4 5
8	I confront poor performance or nonperformance in a timely manner.	1	2	3	4 5
9	My feedback is more dialogue than monologue.	1	2	3	4 5
10	I give good feedback.	1	2	3	4 5
Results					
10-30 Red alert! Re-invent your approach to giving feedback.					
31-37 Strongly mediocre feedback skills.					
38-44 Good feedback abilities, with exciting opportunities to help others improve.					
45-50 Olympic-level feedback skills. You'll go straight up the managerial ladder.					