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## Guidelines for giving feedback

*A customer service representative at a furniture factory has just made a huge mistake. As a result, the company stands to lose an important contract worth tens of thousands. The Managing Director, Tom Burton, is absolutely furious. He storms into the sales department and hurls a string of insults at Peter, the employee responsible for the mistake. He glares at Peter and warns him to 'shape up or you'll be sorry'. He then leaves the department, fuming with rage. Peter is visibly shaken by the outburst. During Tom's tirade, he hunches down in his seat, casts his eyes downwards and doesn't dare say a word. For the rest of the day, he is so upset that he can barely concentrate on his work.*

*That same afternoon, Tom manages to resolve the problem. He calls the client to apologize and work out a solution. Once the crisis is over, Tom regains his composure and goes back into the sales department. He says, 'Sorry I flew off the handle like that this morning, but I was very upset about the potential loss of business. Sorry about that.' Peter breathes a sigh of relief.*

In spite of our good intentions, we're only human. Sometimes things get out of hand; sometimes things go sideways. We all know what it feels like to have those moments of terror, panic or rage. Don't blame yourself or walk around with a load of guilt on your shoulders. Instead, get it off your chest.

Open channels of communication are critical to the success of any organization. In a successful organization, employees are encouraged to speak up, talk about their mistakes, and give and receive feedback.

Open, honest communication all comes down to one word: respect. When you treat people with respect and accord them their due dignity, they will be more likely to listen to your feedback, regardless of whether it's positive or negative.

How do you maintain open channels of communication in the workplace?

- Be honest and sincere in your dealings with people.
- Be a good listener.
- Make your intentions clear.
- Give yourself and your employees the freedom to make mistakes.
- Be clear about your boundaries. Let people know where you draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.
- Put the relationship first.

## Preparing to give feedback

Giving feedback starts with good preparation. Be clear about what you want to say. Check your intentions: what do you hope to gain from this exchange? What kinds of things has your colleague or employee done well? What have they done wrong or, in other words, why are you feeling irritated, disappointed or dissatisfied?

The guidelines summarized below were designed to foster open communication and minimize the risk of misunderstanding.

When giving feedback:

- 1 Give an objective description of the behaviour you've observed.
- 2 Consider the other person's needs as well as your own.
- 3 Use praise to reinforce behaviour you want repeated, and direct criticism at behaviour that needs to be changed.
- 4 Target your feedback at behaviour that can be changed.

The quick points above are largely self-explanatory, but the items below provide more details and 'how to' information.

### I. Give an objective description of the behaviour you've observed

- a. Make your feedback descriptive rather than evaluative or judgmental.
- b. Be prompt with your feedback. The sooner the feedback is given after an event, the more effective it is.
- c. Be concrete and specific. Stick to the facts.

- d. Let the receiver know how you perceive, experience or feel about the behaviour.
  - e. Use I-Statements, not You-Statements.
  - f. Check whether the receiver understood your feedback.
- Finally, put the relationship first. Show respect for the other person's feelings.

### **I.a FOCUS ON THE BEHAVIOUR OBSERVED**

Give an objective description of what happened and your reactions to the situation. Keep the focus on what was actually said and done rather than on your inferences about the other person's motives, intentions or feelings. Serve as a mirror of the behaviour: imagine you have an audio/video recording of the incident. Keep in mind that our brains are programmed to take in information and make inferences almost instantly, so you'll be working against your natural instinct.

Imagine you find two calculation errors in an employee's report. Without thinking, you instantly lash out: 'Your work is riddled with mistakes'. If you do this, you are distorting reality.

Our brains are a whirlwind of thoughts, inferences, feelings and value judgments. It's not always easy to tell the difference between fact and inference. We tend to see our thoughts and observations as the absolute truth.

By staying descriptive instead of evaluating and judgmental, we reduce our problems, irritations and annoyances to more manageable proportions. By keeping our value judgments and moralizing comments in check, the receiver is less likely to get defensive or reject the feedback.

*Imagine yourself in the following situation. As part of your company's new customer-centric policy, staff members with frequent contact with the public are required to wear name badges. You notice that one of your colleagues isn't wearing her name badge even though she's busy helping a customer. As far as you're concerned, rules are rules, and everyone should do as they're told. You find yourself getting irritated with your colleague. You think to yourself: 'Well, I'd better keep my mouth shut; otherwise she'll get mad at me.' Or maybe you're wondering what the consequences will be if your boss catches her without her name badge.*

Imagining different scenarios only accentuates the problem and heightens your irritation. The only observation you can make is that your colleague isn't wearing her name badge. And this is the only feedback you can give her. If you stick to the facts, it's highly likely she will respond with: 'Oh, right, I forgot. I'll put it on right away'.

## **I.b BE PROMPT WITH YOUR FEEDBACK. THE SOONER THE FEEDBACK IS GIVEN AFTER AN EVENT, THE MORE EFFECTIVE IT IS**

It's a double-edged sword. The more concrete the feedback, the greater the chance the other person will remember and admit to the behaviour. If, however, you keep your anger and irritation to yourself, it will eventually build up and sabotage your entire relationship. Either you verbalize the issue and try to resolve it, or you don't and you harbour resentment which eventually poisons the relationship for good. It's healthier and more productive to get any differences of opinions and disagreements out in the open right away.

*William is Maggie's boss. He's annoyed with Maggie because she spends too much time away from her desk chatting with other colleagues; he thinks her behaviour is keeping other people from their work. William is very hard-working by nature and can sit in front of the computer for hours without moving. He decides to put off telling Maggie how he feels until her next progress report. Only then does he tell her: 'I can't help noticing the way you keep distracting everyone from doing their work.' Maggie immediately gets defensive.*

William hasn't followed our guidelines for giving feedback. The only observation he can make is that he's seen Maggie standing around chatting with her colleagues. He has no idea what they were talking about, so he can't say for sure whether she's been keeping them from their work or not. Because he's delayed the feedback, Maggie no longer recognizes or remembers the behaviour. It would have been more effective if William had gone up to Maggie immediately after he saw her chatting with her colleagues and checked that they had been talking about work.

## **I.c BE CONCRETE AND SPECIFIC. STICK TO THE FACTS**

It all sounds so easy: be specific in your feedback. But how?

Start off by asking yourself the following questions: who, what, where, when, why, how, and how much or how often. This way, you can keep yourself from overreacting or jumping to the wrong conclusions when you confront the other person.

For example:

- *Who was involved?* Lisa, Gerry and Bert.
- *What happened?* They were still in the staff café at 11.00 a.m. even though their break was over at 10.45.
- *Where did the incident happen?* In the café.
- *When did the incident happen?* At 11.00 a.m. on Friday and Monday.
- *What were they doing?* Playing cards.
- *How many times did you see this happen?* Twice.

If you don't start off by asking these questions, you might blurt something out like: 'What a lazy lot you are! You never miss an opportunity to slack off, do you?' This kind of reaction can be detrimental to your relationship. Put insults and name-calling aside. It isn't constructive, as the other people have no idea what you're referring to. They will feel attacked and go into defensive mode. Be sure to watch your language, too, as your choice of words can put people on the defensive, especially when you distort reality.

Instead, try telling Lisa: 'I saw you and the others playing cards in the café on Friday and Monday at 11.00 a.m. You know you're supposed to be back at your desk by 10.45. I'll be expecting you to watch this from now on.'

Non-verbal communication is typically quite vague, compared to verbal communication. As a result, it can be understood in several different ways. What exactly does a pat on the back mean? Does it mean 'nice work' or 'cheer up, better luck next time'?

If you're not absolutely clear about what you mean, then you can't blame the receiver for misinterpreting your message.

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### **Homework Assignment**

Try this short exercise right now. Think about a specific incident that's been bothering you and answer the following questions:

- Who was involved?
- What happened?
- Where did it happen?
- When did it happen?
- What was the person doing?
- How many times did you see it happen?

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To sum up, start off by making sure you have all the information you need to be as specific as possible in your description, and then confront the person. Don't forget to focus on the facts. Keep your inferences to yourself.

### **1.d LET THE RECEIVER KNOW HOW YOU PERCEIVE, EXPERIENCE OR FEEL ABOUT THE BEHAVIOUR**

In an emotionally charged situation, make a conscious effort to bring your feelings out in the open where they can be discussed. Your true feelings will probably sneak out sideways, in any case – through the self-expression, relationship and/or appeal side of

your message. By failing to put your feelings into words, you run the risk of being misunderstood, since the four sides of your message won't match.

## **I.e USE I-STATEMENTS, NOT YOU-STATEMENTS**

Many people tend to use a lot of You-Statements when giving feedback. You-Statements, however, cause defensiveness and emotional resistance because they accuse the receiver of being the cause of the problem: 'You can't do that' or 'You're doing it wrongly'. I-Statements, on the other hand, are less threatening, a more effective way of expressing an opinion or describing a behaviour you've observed. For example, you can say, 'I don't think you can do that' or 'I think you should try a different approach'.

How do you usually phrase your feedback? With I-Statements or with You-Statements?

You-Statements are not good building blocks for mutual respect and co-operation. After all, it's difficult to show respect for other people when you're blaming or judging them. You-Statements are all about what the other person is doing wrong. They put the burden of change on the receiver. As a result, they make the receiver feel threatened and summon up feelings of anger, resentment and resistance. You-Statements are ineffective because they:

- show a lack of respect for the other person
- put the blame on the other person
- can feel insulting or judgmental
- trigger sabotage or vindictive behaviour
- undermine the other person's self-confidence
- create resistance to change instead of co-operation
- can be interpreted as a disciplinary action.

It's far more effective to give feedback using I-Statements. When you use an I-Statement, you emphasize the self-disclosure side of your message by revealing what you think and feel. This way, you come across as less threatening. In an I-Statement you keep the focus on yourself instead of putting the other person down ('You're always doing...' or 'You shouldn't be so careless.'). I-Statements defuse rather than fuel arguments, regardless of whether you're right or wrong; they put the focus on the problem or the situation, not on the person. They're solution-oriented. No one can dispute an I-Statement: 'I am upset about...' but it's a lot easier to contest a You-Statement such as 'You're not getting your work done fast enough'.

A You-Statement puts all the blame on the receiver without revealing anything about the sender's thoughts and feelings.

By describing the situation with an I-Statement, you leave the door open for the receiver to decide what they learn from the feedback and what they choose to do with that knowledge.

Keep the following model in mind: I / I / You

I Describe the behaviour you've observed. Be specific.

I Share your feelings about the behaviour:

- What kind of feelings does the behaviour summon up?
- What kind of effect does this behaviour have on you?

YOU Involve the other person and ask:

- Do you recognize the behaviour I've described?
- Can you see what I mean?
- What do you think?

Request what you'd like the other person to do differently and decide on an action plan for the future.

You need to go through the last step in order to improve the other person's performance. If you want to see a change in behaviour, then you need to suggest alternatives. You have to tell the other person what needs to be changed, how to resolve the problem and how to prevent it from happening again in the future. This is a critical part of the learning process. It's also your saving grace, because by offering alternatives, you become an ally, not the enemy.

For example:

*Step 1 I saw you come in this morning at 9.15 a.m. This is the fourth time you've been late.*

*Step 2 It's getting on my nerves because we start at 9.00.*

*Step 3 Do you understand why I'm upset?*

*Do you admit you've been late four times in the past two weeks?*

*What's going on here?*

*Step 4 From now on, I'd like you to make sure you get here by 9.00.*

When explaining what you'd like the other person to do differently, focus on what you do want rather than on what you don't want. Don't say: 'I'd like you to stop coming in late.' Instead, say: 'From now on, I'd like to see you at your desk by 9.00 a.m.'

In some cases, you can skip Steps 1 to 3 and just say what you'd like the other person to do differently. You then express the alternative behaviour as though it were a request: 'Would you mind cleaning up your desk before you go home?' or 'Do you think you could turn the music down a bit?'

When giving feedback, keep in mind that *you* are the one with the problem. If someone else's behaviour is getting on your nerves, it's your problem, not the other person's. That being said, the other person will often agree to change their behaviour in order to solve the problem. In other words, you can't do it alone; you need the other person's co-operation. This is precisely how an I-Statement frames the situation. You describe what's

bothering you, without judging the other person or telling them what to do. You rebuild a foundation of trust and co-operation. Most people are more likely to respond to a call for help than to a threatening You-Statement.

The same holds true for positive feedback. You praise the other person for a job well done, give credit for good behaviour, and highlight their strengths. Complimenting someone on their performance provides positive reinforcement and fosters motivation and commitment. And if you do it with an I-Statement, it sounds even more appreciative: 'I like the way you did that', or 'I really appreciate what you've done'.

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### Homework Assignment

The next time you're in a position to give feedback, keep the 'I / I / You' model in mind.

Use the list below to help you remember who you forget to compliment ('I like the way you did that') and who you forget to criticise ('I think you need to improve on that').

Fill in the information for all the key people in your life. On the left, write down their names. On the right, put a checkmark next to the people you forget to give feedback to.

Name	Does things well but I forget to say: 'Well done, I like the way you did that, good job.'	Gets on my nerves at times (makes me angry), but I forget to say: 'That gets on my nerves, that's annoying; I'd like you to stop doing that.'
My partner My boss My colleague My employee Other		

For every person you checked on the right, try to express your feedback using an I-Statement. What did they do well, or what did they do to annoy you?

Make a mental note to yourself to apply these guidelines the next time you give feedback.

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## **1.f CHECK WHETHER THE RECEIVER UNDERSTOOD YOUR FEEDBACK**

Feedback cannot be helpful if it is not heard or misunderstood. It's always a good idea for the person giving the feedback to check, explicitly, with the receiver, in order to make sure that the receiver heard and understood what you were trying to communicate.

When it comes to communication, misunderstandings are the rule rather than the exception. Don't automatically assume that the receiver has interpreted your message correctly; check. This is Step 3 of the 'I / I / You' model: 'Do you recognize what I'm talking about?' 'Do you understand what I mean?'

## **2. Consider the other person's needs as well as your own**

Be clear about your motives. Focus on the value and usefulness the feedback may provide to the receiver rather than on the 'release' it provides the giver, i.e. you. Take the needs of the receiver into account first and make sure your comments are relevant and helpful.

Feedback says as much about you as it does about the other person (there's more on this in the next chapter). Ask yourself what the receiver stands to gain from your feedback. If you genuinely wish to help the other person and can do so in a friendly, caring way, then go ahead. If you really only want to vent your feelings, humiliate the other person or feel superior, the feedback probably shouldn't be given at all.

The following list summarizes the advantages of giving feedback.

Giving feedback is your opportunity to tell others – family, friends, colleagues, bosses, subordinates – about the effects of their behaviour. You need to share this information in order to:

- achieve the results you want
- build effective working relationships and create a working environment that enables people to thrive
- clarify your expectations and make sure the other people are on the right track
- learn, change and grow
- learn more about yourself and how you interact with others (giving feedback is also a self-revelatory process)
- keep people motivated and enthusiastic.

In short, feedback is your golden opportunity to raise your self-awareness, learn more about other people, develop and maintain good (working) relationships, and achieve the results you want.

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### **Homework Assignment**

The next time you give feedback, keep the following issues in mind:

- Think about what's in it for the other person: an opportunity to improve their performance, to find out how their behaviour affects others, to learn more about themselves, to strengthen your relationship...
  - Explain how the other person's behaviour affects you and why you are giving this feedback.
  - Give your feedback using I-Statements. Keep the focus on yourself.
  - When giving corrective feedback, explain what you'd like the other person to do differently (avoid accentuating what you don't want).
  - Look the other person in the eye and make sure you have their attention.
  - Choose the right time and place, and steer clear of offhand remarks.
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The following case is an example of ineffective feedback.

*You're a very hard worker, full of energy and inner drive. You notice, however, that your colleague can't keep up with you, so you decide to ask him to pick up the pace. This kind of feedback isn't very useful. In fact, it's counter-productive. Your colleague may be very good at his job, even at his slower pace, and you cannot expect or require everyone to work as hard as you. If you judge everyone by the standards you set for yourself, you are likely to demotivate them.*

To be useful, feedback requires the giver to feel personal concern for the person receiving the feedback. Otherwise, it sounds like a lecture and the receiver is likely to get defensive: 'What a load of hot air! Who does he think he is? He should try looking in a mirror sometimes.' With these kinds of thoughts, the receiver ends up focusing on the relationship side of the message and can't hear the factual information you're presenting.

## **3. Give positive as well as negative feedback**

Give positive feedback when you want to praise the other person's behaviour and performance, and give corrective feedback when you want the other person to modify or correct their actions.

When giving feedback, many people tend to focus what the other person needs to do in order to improve. When we cast ourselves in the role of 'expert', we naturally feel superior to others. Unfortunately, we often forget to give positive feedback, whereas people need praise and compliments to stay motivated and learn new skills.

If you're the type of person who forgets to acknowledge people when they do something right, practice giving three compliments over the course of the next week. Compliments work best when they are genuine, so be sincere. Also, be specific and point to actions. You can use the 'I / I / You' model as a guide.

Compliments change the giver as well as the receiver. It's amazing to see how your whole outlook on life changes when you focus on the positive. The next time you give a compliment, notice what happens. See if you release a little tension in your body. Notice whether you soften your resistance to another person or shed resentment. See if your breathing becomes a little slower, a little deeper. Even many prescription drugs cannot deliver benefits like these. The best part about compliments is that they are free and easy. We can give them all the time and they don't require much effort on our part: 'I like the way you structured that report', or 'I'm very pleased with the quality of the work you've been producing lately'. Another way to give positive feedback is to thank people for their effort and contributions.

By noticing and acknowledging the good things people do, you show your appreciation for their behaviour and efforts: 'I was impressed by your decision-making ability in that situation' or 'I appreciate the time and energy you've invested in giving me feedback'.

Positive feedback encourages positive actions. Every employee likes to know that they are making a positive contribution to the company and are not just disposable objects. Be specific about what they're doing right and they will know what they need to do next time to get praise. In addition, by providing positive feedback, you show people that you are balanced and fair in your assessment of their work. As a result, they will be more open to listening to your feedback when they know you are not going to rake them over the coals.

When giving corrective feedback, define positive steps and agree on what future performance is appropriate for the other person. If there are specific things the other person needs to start doing or needs to stop doing, make sure they are clearly identified. By telling people what you'd like them to do differently and pointing out alternatives, your feedback is constructive rather than a pronouncement of the receiver's inadequacy. This is particularly true for people in management positions.

And, last but not least, if people use your corrective feedback to change their behaviour, be sure to acknowledge it right away and thank them for their effort. This way, you let them know they're on the right track.

## 4. Direct your feedback at behaviour that can be changed

Feedback is useful only when it relates to something the other person can control. Feedback is useless when it is about personal attributes or opportunities that have already been missed. The problem with both is that the person can't do anything about them even if they wanted to. As a result, giving feedback based on these kinds of issues is not only useless but is likely to cause resentment (or worse). Be honest. Take the other person's skills and abilities into account. Look back at the previous example: if you don't think your colleague can work as hard as you, then there's no point in commenting on his pace of work. You can't change the situation. In fact, you might make things worse by hurting his feelings and poisoning your relationship. Your colleague may end up thinking, 'Well, apparently my best isn't good enough.'

*Here's an example. Frank has scrofula, an infection of the skin on his neck. Due to his illness, he has bad body odour but is allergic to soap and deodorant. Frank can't help the way he smells. He's painfully aware of the problem and tries his best to keep it under control, but unfortunately there's not much he can do about it. Frank would be terribly upset if someone were to tell him to shower more often or, worse, that he stinks.*

There's no point in giving Frank feedback about his personal hygiene when you know he has scrofula. If you didn't know about his medical situation, however, then you could ask him – gently – what the problem was. While this might be difficult in practice, keep in mind that your intentions are good: the fact that you think Frank smells means that others probably think so, too, and maybe Frank doesn't realize that others have noticed or has become desensitized. Your objective is to be helpful, not to put Frank down or embarrass him.

Now that you know the guidelines for giving feedback, let's take a look at the next chapter, where we'll cover the guidelines for receiving feedback.

# 4

## *Guidelines for receiving feedback*

How do you usually react to feedback? 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. As for positive feedback, it often goes in one ear and out the other. It feels strange to get praise just for doing your job properly.

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### **Homework Assignment**

What did you think and how did you react the last time you received positive feedback?

What did you think and how did you react the last time you received negative feedback?

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Do you identify with the following behaviour patterns?

When someone gives you negative feedback, you're very hard on yourself. You think it's all your fault. When you get positive feedback, however, you brush it off and attribute it to the situation or the circumstances. You don't think you've done anything out of the ordinary, anything that would deserve praise. Does this sound like you? If you identify with these patterns, then you've been missing out on all kinds of opportunities to boost your self-esteem.

*It's Tony's responsibility to write the minutes for the Board of Directors' meeting. This week, however, he hasn't managed to complete them on time. Tom, his direct boss, calls him into his office. Tony feels himself getting more and more anxious as he approaches Tom's office. When Tom points out that Tony hasn't submitted the minutes on time, Tony gets defensive: 'Yes, but I needed some additional information from Trudy, and she hasn't been here for the past three days. In the meantime, I had two rush jobs that had to be finished for yesterday, plus Jan was off sick all day yesterday so I got stuck manning the phones for two hours.'*

Tony is trying to rationalize his behaviour, to explain why things happened the way they did. This is a very common defence mechanism. There may very well have been circumstances beyond his control, but in his efforts to explain away the problem, he isn't paying attention to the feedback. Instead, he's busy thinking about what he's going to say next. Tom, however, doesn't particularly care why Tony is late with the minutes. Rather than trying to defend himself, Tony would do better to acknowledge the missed deadline and come up with a solution to prevent it happening again.

Why does Tony get so defensive? Why can't he just say: 'Yes, I know I'm late with the minutes this week. Sorry about that. I'll do my best to make sure you get them on time next week.' Or, better yet, why didn't he go see Tom earlier in the week to let him know that he wouldn't be able to complete the minutes on time? Why didn't he establish clear boundaries from the start?

To find out why, we need to take a closer look inside Tony's brain, as it were. What kind of thoughts are running through his head? Why does he have such a hard time accepting feedback? Tony is tense and nervous because he's thinking:

- I have to get those minutes done... otherwise they'll think I'm incompetent.
- I have to make sure I avoid arguments at all costs. I can't risk getting Tom angry.

Using techniques from RET theory (see Chapter 6), Tony can ask himself whether these thoughts are helpful, productive or beneficial for his self-esteem. Since he worries about making other people angry, he finds it difficult to establish clear boundaries. Tony needs to check how he feels about the following questions: Do people always get angry when I establish my boundaries? If some people do get angry, how bad is it? Does my worrying about making people angry help me do my job better? What kind of consequences does it have for my behaviour?

Is Tony being realistic? Are his thoughts based on fact or fantasy? Are his feelings of self-worth caught up in whether he completes the minutes on time? Does he have to be perfect in order to be liked, admired and deemed competent? Does he need to be liked, admired and deemed competent?

Tony reacts defensively and tries to avoid being criticized by shifting the blame elsewhere. In his head, it's not his fault that he couldn't make the deadline. Defensiveness is a very common reaction to criticism. Other common defence mechanisms include:

- Not listening to the feedback because you're already planning what you're going to say next or because you're (over)sensitive to criticism.
- Second-guessing the motives of the feedback giver: 'This guy is always on my case' or 'I'm sure she has a hidden agenda'.
- Questioning the validity of the feedback: 'It's not fair. Given the circumstances, I did the best I could.'

- Retaliating against the person giving feedback by using a You-Statement to criticize them: ‘Well, it’s not like you ever send your reports out on time.’

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### **Homework Assignment**

Which of the above defence mechanisms do you usually use? If you’re not sure, ask your partner, a close friend or a colleague at work.

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As long as you accept feedback as a learning opportunity and use it constructively, then there’s no need to get defensive. Don’t forget that feedback can be positive as well as negative.

The fact that you are open to feedback doesn’t necessarily mean that you agree with it. It just means that you are willing to hear the other person out and take their comments into consideration. If you feel the need to justify your behaviour, then ask the person giving you feedback if they would like to hear what you have to say. Keep in mind, however, that no matter what you say, you can’t change the end result or how the feedback giver feels about it. For example, if you were late because of road works, it won’t prevent the other person from being annoyed.

So, how should you respond when someone goes to the trouble of offering you feedback? Try the following guidelines:

When receiving feedback:

- 1 Don’t interpret the feedback as a personal attack.
- 2 Avoid reacting defensively, getting upset or repressing your true feelings.
- 3 Try to understand the feedback and ask for clarification.
- 4 Acknowledge and thank the person for the feedback.
- 5 Evaluate the feedback.
- 6 Decide what you intend to do with the feedback.
- 7 Accept praise graciously. Don’t brush it off as though it was nothing.

Finally, remember to put your relationship first. Show respect for the other person’s feelings.

The guidelines above are largely self-explanatory, but the items below provide more details and ‘how to’ information.

# 1. Don't interpret the feedback as a personal attack

Many people respond quite negatively to feedback, irrespective of how well-intentioned it might be. One of the biggest pitfalls is to experience feedback as a personal attack, as something that defines you as a failure.

Instead, think of feedback as an opportunity for you to learn and grow. The criticism you receive is specific to your work or a particular behaviour at a given moment in time and is not a measure of your self-worth.

Whether or not you interpret the feedback as a personal attack depends on how the feedback is presented. If the feedback describes observable behaviour and specific incidents, you are less likely to take it personally. If the feedback is vague or too general, however, then you will probably feel attacked or hurt. The tone of voice of the person giving you feedback also plays an important part in how you react to it.

If you feel hurt or attacked in response to the feedback you get, then say so. This is your opportunity to let the feedback giver know how their message is coming across. It also buys you some time to think about what you want to do next.

## 2. Avoid reacting defensively

Getting defensive is another common pitfall. Many people automatically switch into defensive mode when they are criticized. We try to justify our behaviour rather than acknowledge the possibility that there may be some truth in the criticism or point of view of the person who's giving us the feedback. We might not like being confronted about something we know we did wrong, such as not complying with security procedures. Or perhaps we feel guilty but can't acknowledge our real feelings. Or maybe we want to come across as better than we really are. There are all kinds of reasons for adopting a defensive attitude.

A more effective reaction would be to listen carefully and let go of the need to justify, defend or explain your actions. Give yourself time and space to assimilate and evaluate the information and determine what you think it means for you. Afterwards, it's up to you to choose which action you want to take – if any.

### 3. Try to understand the feedback and ask for clarification

The way in which feedback is given contributes to the learning process. Feedback that is vague or too general is not as valuable as feedback that is descriptive and specific. This is all the more true for feedback that isn't structured according to the 'I – I – You' model. If you make the decision to take the feedback as a learning opportunity, then you need to ask questions to make sure you understand the point the person giving the feedback is trying to make, as well as the changes in behaviour that are expected of you.

To get the most out of feedback, you need to engage in active listening. Here's what good listeners know – and you should, too:

- 1 Focus your attention on the person giving you the feedback.
- 2 Listen carefully and ask for specific factual examples.
- 3 Summarize the ideas in your own words to make sure you understand what you've been told.

The next time you're in a position to receive feedback, try to apply these guidelines.

*Feedback giver: 'I've noticed your performance has been off lately.'*

*Feedback receiver: 'What do you mean by "lately"? What do you mean by "off"? Are you referring to a specific project or incident? What's your basis for comparison? Can you give me a more definite example?'*

By seeking clarification, you show that you are interested in listening to whatever the feedback giver has to say while helping them to be as specific as possible. This gives you more information about the behaviour that is up for discussion, how the other person feels about it and the reasoning behind the conclusions that have been drawn. You react solely to the factual information side of the message.

*Feedback giver: 'The management here is absolutely useless.'*

*Feedback receiver: 'Are you referring to anyone in particular? What exactly has this person done to make you think they're useless?'*

*Feedback giver: 'The music is much too loud. It's getting on my nerves. Could you turn it down?'*

*Feedback receiver: 'Is there something specific about it that's bothering you?'*

In this last example, the receiver focuses on the feedback giver's feelings. By reacting to the self-disclosure side of the message, you can gain greater insight into what the feedback says about the person giving it.

Reacting to the self-disclosure side of the message can be especially effective when the person delivering the feedback has revealed something about their standards and values. It's then up to you to decide how you want to use this information in the future.

*Feedback giver: 'I see your desk is buried under a mound of papers. It looks like a war zone in here. How on earth do you manage to get any work done in such a mess?'*

*Feedback receiver: 'I understand you think my desk is a mess, but what makes you think it's preventing me from getting my work done properly?'*

In this situation, you've learned something about the feedback giver: this person prefers to have an extremely organized desk.

## 4. Acknowledge and thank the other person for the feedback

Feedback enables us to learn and progress, which ultimately improves our performance in the future. In addition, when you acknowledge and thank the person giving you the feedback, it has a positive effect on your relationship. Don't forget to show your appreciation for the positive feedback that you get. Be sure to thank the other person.

*Feedback giver: 'I see you've made some mistakes in your calculations. Do you need any help?'*

*Feedback receiver: 'I'm really glad you brought this up. I didn't dare ask because I was afraid of looking stupid.'*

*Feedback giver: 'The information you've given us has been instrumental in helping us solve the problem. My compliments for a job well done.'*

*Feedback receiver: 'Thanks for noticing. I really appreciate it.'*

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### Homework Assignment

Are you able to show your appreciation for the feedback you get?

Is it hard for you to thank the feedback giver? If so, why?

How do you react to positive versus negative feedback?

What kind of feelings come up when you do thank the other person for the feedback?

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## 5. Evaluate the feedback

It's up to you to decide what you want to do with the feedback you receive. You are the final judge of what you're going to do next. To evaluate the feedback, start by asking yourself the following questions:

- Is the feedback positive or negative? Is it fair or unfair?
- Do I agree with the feedback? Is this the first time I'm hearing this?

The way you interpret the feedback depends on the way it's presented. Many of my students tell me that they appreciate hearing constructive, corrective feedback. They know the person giving them the feedback has their best interests at heart, even if it means they are expected to perform better or change their behaviour afterwards.

If, on the other hand, you take the corrective feedback badly, then it's probably because the feedback giver injected their personal values into the description of your behaviour. You end up feeling judged, and that's never a pleasant experience for anyone. Whether or not you think the feedback is fair or unfair also depends on how objective versus judgmental the person delivering it is. If, for example, you truly believe you've given your all but you still get negative feedback, you're likely to reject any criticism as unfair. The more concrete and specific the feedback, the more likely you are to accept it.

## 6. Decide what you intend to do with the feedback

You are free to accept the feedback, determine its relevance for you, offer a counter-proposal or ignore it entirely. It's up to you to decide what, if anything, you intend to do with it. So:

- Ask yourself what you want to do with the feedback.
- If you decide not to change anything about your behaviour because, for example, you think the feedback says more about the person giving you the feedback than it does about you, then let the feedback giver know.
- If you do decide to take the feedback into account and change your behaviour accordingly, tell the person delivering the feedback and commit yourself to specific actions by specific dates. If necessary, ask for support to help you fulfil your commitments.
- If you're not sure about what you should do with the feedback, check with a close colleague, friend or relative to see if they agree with the comments that have been made. Then decide what course of action you will take.

Of course, in some cases you're not entirely free to decide on your own what you should do with the feedback. When it comes to feedback from your boss, for example, you often

have no other choice but to accept it and act on it; otherwise you may jeopardize your future with the company.

## 7. Accept praise graciously

How do you respond to praise? Do you mumble and fumble for words, or do you bask graciously in the limelight, treasuring your moment of glory? After all, you probably know when you've done well and when you deserve the rewards that come from your accomplishments. How you accept praise has to do with your self-esteem and the way you validate your efforts. By thanking the feedback giver, you reciprocate the appreciation, drawing you closer together. Treat praise like a gift; say a word of thanks and acknowledge the giver graciously and sincerely. How would you like it if you gave someone a gift and they shrugged it off by saying 'It's nothing, really' or 'You shouldn't have'?

The table below summarizes the different ways we react to praise.

*Feedback giver: I think you're a very nice person to work with.*

*Feedback receiver: What does he want from me?*

You show your lack of trust.

*Feedback receiver: If he knew what I was really like, he'd never say such a thing.*

You let your self-critical thoughts reinforce your low self-esteem.

*Feedback receiver: He's just saying that to get on my good side. I can't stand it when people try to suck up to me.*

You question the other person's motives.

*Feedback receiver: Thanks!*

There are, of course, a number of other possible reactions. Think about how you react to praise: what kind of thoughts do you usually have running through your head?

Being able to listen attentively to the other person and respond appropriately is no simple matter. Our feelings, past experiences, standards, values and self-esteem issues can get in the way, making it difficult for us to really hear what the other person is saying at that precise moment in time. Sometimes it takes a while for the information to sink in.

## Have I met all the necessary conditions?

The ideal conditions for receiving feedback are nearly the same as for giving feedback. How can you make sure the other person will be receptive to hearing your feedback? First of all, find a private setting where you can take your time to deliver the feedback properly without rushing, and then let trust, respect, attention and confidentiality be your guiding principles.

Sometimes, however, the conditions are less than ideal. If you're convinced the person giving you feedback just doesn't like you and has come looking for a fight, don't overreact and risk damaging the relationship any further. Instead, keep in mind that you – and only you – have the power to decide what to do with the feedback. You are the final judge.

If you ever find yourself in such a situation, you can also establish some ground rules. For example, you can ask the other person to clarify their intentions or tell them that the feedback has hurt your feelings. If that doesn't change the situation, you can always decide afterwards to just ignore the feedback. Negative feedback can be hard on the ego, but if we do ignore it, we miss the opportunity to improve and better ourselves. Can you really be sure there is no truth at all in the other person's comments?

## Coping with your feelings

Still wondering what to do with the feedback you've received? Should you take it seriously and do something about it? When in doubt, ask a close colleague, friend or relative what they think about the feedback and whether they agree. If you feel angry, upset or hurt by the feedback, hold off on deciding what to do next until you've had a chance to simmer down. Is there any truth to the feedback? Do you need to take it on board and learn something from it? Or can you just ignore it and tell yourself it's the other person who has the problem, not you?

When feedback isn't given according to the guidelines described above, it often creates an emotionally charged situation. Being told that you need to improve yourself isn't always easy, but it's an important part of the learning process. Although you might feel hurt in response to the criticism, try not to let those feelings deter you from using the feedback to your best advantage. Be receptive to what you are hearing, even if you feel threatened or attacked by the information. Ask the person to give you specific examples of the point they are trying to make or to clarify their intentions.

While employees fully expect their boss to comment on their performance, most are very reluctant to give their boss any feedback. They either think it's inappropriate or they're afraid it might have negative consequences on their future with the company. If you are in a management position, let your employees know in no uncertain terms that you are open to receiving feedback yourself. They will probably not come forward spontaneously, so be sure to seek them out, ask them how they think you're doing – and be receptive to their observations.

Feedback enables people to learn and progress, which ultimately improves their performance as well as their relationships with others. It is accepted that feedback directs behaviour and motivates performance at work, and no matter how good or effective an individual is, they can always get better. By asking for and receiving feedback, we gain greater insight into how our actions and behaviour affect the thoughts and feelings of those around us. Whatever the state of our self-awareness, we all benefit enormously from receiving feedback as it helps us learn and grow.

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### **Homework Assignment**

Over the course of the next week, make a point of asking for feedback on at least four separate occasions. If necessary, ask people explicitly for their input, such as your boss, one of your colleagues, an employee, your partner or a close friend. As you listen, make a conscious effort to follow the guidelines for receiving feedback.

Be specific in your request for feedback. An open-ended question such as 'How do you think I'm doing?' may seem like a good starting point, but most people are more comfortable responding to specific questions. For example, after you've just finished running a difficult meeting, you could ask the other person to outline what they think the positive points were and suggest what could have been done differently. An after-the-fact evaluation is also a form of feedback.

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