

Giving and Receiving Feedback

Why bother to give feedback?

People develop their skills by learning from their experiences. Reflecting on what worked well and understanding why it worked well gives a person insight into how to address similar issues in the future.

The same holds true for situations that do *not* go so well. Thinking through the circumstances, questioning the approach taken, considering how things could be done differently on a future occasion and using the value of hindsight: through all of these we learn how to improve on our working practices and day-to-day behaviour.

Talking about a particular issue with someone we trust, or receiving feedback from someone who has observed the situation, can be highly valuable. Managed skilfully, feedback facilitates learning by reinforcing what behaviours to continue to do more of and what to omit or do less frequently. A person is likely to seek feedback if they recognise the potential for learning that it offers.

In the workplace, it is the manager's responsibility to provide feedback about performance to the people in their team. People may also be offered feedback by a peer, someone external to the organisation, a colleague from another department, a subordinate, friend or a family member. Indeed, it may be unexpected and unsolicited and the topic need not be about work performance, but focussed on personal behaviour. It may be given outside of the workplace but still have a significant impact on one's performance at work. Therefore, having the ability to give and receive feedback well is a useful skill in many areas of life and one that everyone in the workplace should master.

What can go wrong?

A number of things can contribute to unsatisfactory feedback. If given badly, the session may result in damage to the relationship between the giver and receiver, or compound the failings of an already fragile relationship. If the recipient hears the feedback purely as a criticism of themselves or their performance, they are likely to feel defensive, angry and hostile. They may deny the feedback, perceive it as negative and something to be avoided. Most significantly, if feedback is not given well, the opportunity for learning and personal development is likely to be missed, not only in the moment but also in the future.

Giving Negative Feedback

If negative feedback is to be given to a colleague it is important to state clearly what is unacceptable and what needs to be different following the feedback. The focus should be on the behaviour and it should not come across as an assault on the person. No one likes to be criticised and the skill of the person giving feedback can affect, to a large extent, how it is received. It is also important to consider whether the recipient will require any support following the feedback and how this will be sourced.

If you are faced with having to give negative feedback, apply the principles which are described below:



Principles for Giving Negative Feedback

- Be clear about the purpose of the feedback
- Be specific and avoid generalisation
- Speak for yourself, using “I”
- Explore possible reasons for the behaviour and acknowledge the other person’s view
- State the emotional impact and the effect of the behaviour
- Explain clearly how you would like the behaviour to change
- Confirm the benefits of change

In the following scenario, a staff member has become increasingly angry with a team colleague. The aggrieved member has decided to give feedback regarding the manner in which the colleague behaves in team meetings. This is a potentially difficult conversation and needs to be conducted assertively. An appropriate approach to the feedback is modelled and explained in Example 1. This is followed by a second, less suitable, approach as described in Example 2.

Model Example 1: Staff member giving negative feedback to a team colleague

“In yesterday’s team meeting, you contradicted me several times in front of the entire team. This has been a repeating pattern over the past three meetings. (Specific)

When you contradict me in the presence of others I feel belittled and angry. I also think it closes down contributions from other members of the team. (Impact)

In future, please ask me to clarify my contributions to team discussions, and do not discount them or contradict me. (Change required)

In that way I will feel heard and respected. Also, I think it will encourage discussion within the team and make for more inclusive decision-making. This will result in greater learning and development of all team members and will improve patient care.” (Benefit)

In this model example, the person giving feedback focuses on the **behaviour** (*contradiction in public*) and **how it affects them** (*when you do this I feel*). This is not an accusation, but a statement of fact which is, therefore, beyond dispute. They also mention their **observation on what they think** is happening within the rest of the team (*I also think it closes down contributions....*), which may or may not be the case. A request is made to change behaviour in a specific way (*In the future, please...*). Clear requests like this make it is easy to identify the benefits of such change (*This will result in....*).

Now consider the alternative **Example 2:**

“In yesterday’s team meeting you belittled me in front of the entire team by contradicting me. This wasn’t the first time – you’re always doing it. (Accusing and generalising)

It also stops other people from contributing to discussions. (Assumption)

Please stop doing it.” (General change request)

Note the differences in the two approaches. In this second example, the person receiving feedback is accused of something that they may have not intended (*..... you belittled me.....*). Indeed, they may be genuinely surprised at the accusation and dispute it. Furthermore, there is an assumption from the giver that the recipient’s behaviour towards them is having an impact on the team (*It also stops other people....*). Whilst this might well be the case, it would need to be checked out. It will possibly be refuted by the recipient in the absence of evidence, especially if they feel verbally attacked by the person giving the feedback. This feedback may leave the recipient feeling antagonised and lead to a more difficult relationship.



It is essential to understand that these two examples will be *heard and interpreted* very differently by the recipient. In the first example, they will hear how their behaviour impacts on the giver, and a request to change their behaviour in a specific way. It is a problem-solving approach to behaviour change, not an accusation. Whilst the recipient may not welcome such assertive feedback, it does not give grounds for offence. In the second example, the feedback is likely to be heard as an accusation and interpreted as an aggressive statement. Rather than build a relationship, it is more likely to damage it.

When giving feedback ensure that you focus on the behaviour and how it affects you, and not make accusations with comments such as “you make me feel.....”.

A key message is to remember the structure: “When you do xxx , I feel yyy”

Preparing for a feedback session

The aim of giving feedback is to facilitate learning and personal development. Therefore, the conversation should enable purposeful reflection, reinforcement of good practice, potential problem-solving and action planning for change. In order to get the best outcome from the time available, it is incumbent on the provider to prepare thoroughly for a feedback session. It is essential to focus on *behaviour* and not criticise the person receiving feedback. It is also important to give them time to respond.

Rehearsing the points to be made, thinking through how these may be received and anticipating what the recipient may say in response, is all part of preparing thoroughly. By considering how the session may progress and predicting what various responses could be made to the points raised, the provider of feedback can be suitably prepared to respond calmly, however the conversation flows.

Preparing in this amount of detail will be time well spent. It enables the provider of feedback to keep control of their feelings and not become overwhelmed; to stay calm and confident throughout the meeting, whatever response the recipient makes; also, to ensure that they impart the key messages that they wish the recipient to hear. This will help them to remain in a problem-solving, supportive mode, even if the person they are conversing with becomes anxious, upset or challenging.

How insightful are we?

Although it is an essential part of one’s personal and professional development, people do not automatically reflect on their behaviour. They will almost certainly have instinctive feelings about the outcome of any given situation, but may not have the insight or skills to do what amounts to an analysis of the circumstances and their own role in the outcome. Therefore, the willingness and ability to critique one’s own performance depends on the individual.

Some people are more inclined towards personal reflection than others and the ability to critique within a balanced framework is a skill in itself. Some people are hyper-critical of themselves and can “beat themselves up” endlessly. Others may find it difficult to find any fault in their behaviour or performance. Acknowledging “good enough” behaviour, or under-performance, and then identifying points for change, is a useful outcome of personal reflection.

It is often assumed that people are aware of how they come across to others and that their behaviour is deliberate. In fact, insight about our own behaviour and how it affects others is less common than might



be thought. Imagine you know someone who can give you a “look” that makes you feel uncomfortable. The person giving the “look” may be completely unaware of the facial expression they are giving you and, more importantly, of the effect that it is having on you. This effect will be the result of your past experiences with the person and, possibly, someone else that they (subconsciously or consciously) remind you of. Unless you are willing to tell this person what is happening when they look at you in this certain way, they may not be aware that it is an issue for you and that you would like them to change.

Equally, if someone would prefer that we changed our behaviour in some way, but is unwilling to bring it to our attention, there is little chance that we will make that change so long as we remain in ignorance as to how others are being affected by our actions.

Unless we are prepared to give people feedback on their behaviour they will not be in a position to change, because they won't know how their behaviour is actually perceived or the effect it has on others. We also need to be open to receiving feedback and to listen objectively to what we are being told, so that we are aware of how our actions affect others and can change our behaviour if we learn that it is unacceptable in some way.

Why is giving feedback avoided?

Whilst there are times when people lack insight into how their actions affect others, it is also true that people deliberately choose to behave in unacceptable ways. However, dealing with inappropriate behaviour and poor performance of staff is often avoided in organisations. If it is not addressed it sends out a message to the rest of the team, department or organisation that the behaviour is acceptable. The longer the practice goes unquestioned and unresolved, the more embedded the undesirable behaviour is likely to become. Therefore, giving negative feedback should not be avoided, but dealt with assertively.

Avoidance can be due to a number of reasons, including fear of confrontation. This is particularly relevant if a person lacks the knowledge and skills to deal assertively with the situation. Other examples of things that may affect a person's decision not to give feedback include, if they:

- Have not been taught how to give feedback;
- Have concerns about a professional hierarchy;
- Are worried about how the other person will react;
- Think that it will make no difference – so, why bother;
- Feel ill-equipped to deal with any negativity that may come back at them;
- Have had a bad experience when giving feedback and have felt unsupported following it;
- Have personally had a bad experience when receiving feedback and are reluctant to give it.

Here are some examples of what can contribute to a poor feedback session:

- ***The person receiving feedback feels criticised***

The art of good feedback is not to destructively criticise the person but to focus on their behaviour. If someone thinks they are being criticised they are likely to experience negative feelings such as anger or anxiety. This is likely to stop the person who is on the receiving end from processing the feedback or responding logically to what they are hearing. They may stop listening, become aggressive or defensive, or discount the feedback. The outcome is likely to be inconclusive and the issue unresolved.



- ***The person giving feedback feels uncomfortable***

The person receiving feedback may feel more comfortable with the process than the person giving it. If the recipient starts to question what is being said, perhaps to clarify a point of feedback, this could be misinterpreted as evidence of an unwillingness to take on board the comments being fed back. The person giving feedback can become defensive under these circumstances.

- ***The person receiving negative feedback becomes upset***

Many people are disconcerted when the person they are with shows discomfort. They may prefer to close down the conversation, and opt to resume it at a later stage. (This follow-up conversation may never happen.) This can leave the person providing feedback feeling dissatisfied; the recipient may feel a sense of relief, however.

- ***The person receiving negative feedback goes on the attack***

The person receiving feedback may think that it is an unfair reflection of their performance and state this forcefully. If the person giving feedback then becomes defensive, the moment for discussing performance improvement may be lost.

- ***Feedback is generalised or inaccurate***

Being inaccurate with the facts or too generalised with comments will affect the confidence that the recipient can have in the message and the person delivering it. It may lead to them questioning the relevance and content of the feedback, expose any inaccuracy and thus undermine the process. This can occur with both positive and negative feedback.

- ***Feedback is based on hearsay***

Providing feedback via a third party should be avoided if possible. Acting on hearsay allows the person receiving the feedback to challenge its validity. The person giving feedback should speak in the first person, providing objective information on personal observation. It is preferable to encourage and support another in the giving of feedback, rather than act as a spokesperson.

- ***Positive feedback is discounted***

It is as important to acknowledge positive feedback as to give it. Some people find it difficult to accept compliments and shrug them off with comments such as: “I was just doing my job”; “It was nothing”; “I didn’t do anything, it was”; “I bet you say that to everyone!” Whilst genuine modesty might be behind these throw-away comments, they will be perceived as a put down and should be avoided.

Giving Positive Feedback

Not all feedback is negative and it is important to give positive feedback when appropriate. However, this needs to be more than a “well done” or “thank you” if it is to be helpful for learning. It is useful to note that people can have an unsatisfactory experience when they give positive feedback, as in the example in the immediate paragraph above. If experienced frequently, it can eventually make the giver of the feedback reluctant to compliment others on their performance. This reluctance can be learnt from one’s experience outside of the workplace. People do not normally recognise this as an avoidance of giving feedback, although the result of being economical with compliments can be just as far-reaching.

When giving positive feedback, it must be perceived to be genuine. Giving “gushing” compliments may leave the recipient feeling uncomfortable or uncertain of its validity. When preparing to give positive



feedback, identify the particular points of good practice that need to be mentioned. Whilst reinforcing the positive behaviour, there may be areas for improvement that can also be brought to the recipient's attention. In these circumstances, the way in which feedback is structured can make the difference between a recipient hearing a positive message or being left with negative connotations. Therefore, it is important to ensure that the positive feedback is not negated by poor feedback technique.

The following principles should be applied when giving positive feedback:

Principles for Giving Positive Feedback

- Acknowledge with thanks
- Specify the behaviour or action that has been done well
- Speak for yourself – “I”
- When identifying an area for further improvement, **avoid** the word “BUT”; use “AND”.

In the following scenario, a staff member is giving positive feedback to a junior colleague about a specific incident they observed the previous day. They also have pointers for improvement that they wish to discuss with this colleague, to enable the recipient to learn from the experience and further develop their skills. An appropriate approach to the feedback is modelled and explained in Example 3. The feedback described in Example 4 differs by only ONE word, which significantly alters the entire message that will be heard by the recipient.

Model Example 3: Feedback to a junior colleague

“I think you dealt with Mrs Smith's daughter extremely well yesterday afternoon; thank you for spending time with her. (Acknowledge)

She was clearly angry at first and I think that, after she calmed down, you listened very well to her concerns and dealt skilfully with her questions. (Specific)

And, another time you have to deal with a patient or relative who is so angry, you might try at first to diffuse the situation by..... “(Identify what needs to improve by making a suggestion).

Now consider the alternative **Example 4:**

“I think you dealt with Mrs Smith's daughter extremely well yesterday afternoon; thank you for spending time with her. She was clearly angry at first and I think that, after she calmed down, you listened very well to her concerns and dealt skilfully with her questions.

But, another time you have to deal with a patient or relative who is so angry, you might try at first to diffuse the situation by”.

In this instance, the person receiving feedback would interpret the message as ‘you don't *really* think I dealt with Mrs Smith's daughter extremely well’. This is because the word “but” negates the sentence that has immediately preceded it. The result would be that the positive feedback would be *heard* as negative feedback and the recipient would focus on what didn't go well rather than the good performance.

When people receive good feedback, they are often waiting for the “*but*”. It is important, therefore, to be aware that “and” is the positive conjunction to use in these circumstances.

A key message is to remember: Do not use the word “BUT”; replace it with “AND”.



Receiving Feedback

A feedback session is a two-way process, with the recipient having the opportunity to respond to and discuss what they have been told. When receiving feedback, listen carefully to what is being said and maximise the time for learning and development.

Receiving Negative Feedback

It is important to listen objectively to the points being made and not to become defensive. When the feedback has been completed the recipient should be given the opportunity to respond.

When receiving negative feedback:

- Listen carefully to what has been said and decide whether there is any truth in it.
- Acknowledge the behaviour that has been accurately reported, even if this is only a small part.
- If appropriate, apologise for the behaviour or express regret.
- Ask questions about how to solve the problem, or state what you will do differently in the future.
- If the feedback is too generalised or unclear, invite the person to be more specific and constructive.

Example Response to No. 1 above:

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention. I hadn’t realised that I had been contradicting you so frequently in team meetings and I’m sorry that you have felt belittled. I’ll make every effort not to do this in future. I don’t accept that this is the reason for lack of discussion amongst the team and I think that others do contribute to the clinical decisions we take.”

With this response there has been some acknowledgement of behaviour and an apology. There has also been disagreement regarding the effect of the behaviour on the team, which may warrant further exploration. The person receiving the apology may not be entirely satisfied with this response to their feedback. However, it is an apology on which they can then build.

Receiving Positive Feedback

Compliments are like gifts and need to be acknowledged. If they are discounted, unaccepted or are thrown back in the giver’s face, then the giver may feel put down. They will then be less likely to give positive feedback in the future, not only to that person but also to others.

When receiving positive feedback:

- Accept by saying “Thank You”.
- Say how pleased you feel with the feedback.
- Acknowledge the person who is giving the feedback.
- If the compliment is generalised or “over the top”, ask for more specific feedback.

Example Response to No. 3 above:

“Thank you very much. I’m glad that you thought I handled her questions well and I appreciate you taking the time to tell me. It’s also useful having some idea on how I could improve if I come across a similar situation in the future. I’d find it helpful if we could discuss this a bit more”.



The examples in this paper serve to illustrate the application of the main principles when giving and receiving feedback. They provide a framework for dealing with feedback in a positive manner. By having an understanding of what lies behind the principles, and taking the time to rehearse the structure of a feedback session, the reader should be equipped with the knowledge and confidence to be assertive when giving and receiving feedback.

In conclusion

Understanding the techniques of giving and receiving feedback enables people to have open and honest, constructive dialogues. Mastering these skills enables the giver to engage in potentially difficult conversations, without experiencing fear of confrontation. For the recipient, it allows them to hear and take on board difficult messages without feeling personally criticised and threatened. A well-constructed feedback session will provide development and learning for both giver and receiver.

Ten Key Points:

- Giving constructive feedback on performance and behaviour is a key developmental tool.
- Done well it will accelerate learning and enhance performance.
- Done badly it may contribute to relationship breakdown and loss of a valuable learning opportunity.
- It is important to master the skills of giving and receiving positive and negative feedback in order to maximise the learning opportunity that this provides.
- Prepare well for any feedback session.
- When giving feedback, focus on behaviour and its impact.
- Don't avoid giving negative feedback; it gives the wrong message to the person, team and organisation.
- Be specific, unambiguous and speak for yourself, using "I".
- Omit the word "BUT" from feedback vocabulary; use "AND".
- Do not be defensive when you receive feedback. Listen objectively and focus on learning from the experience.

And finally, don't avoid having difficult conversations. Master the techniques so that both giver and recipient have a positive outcome, learn from the experience and develop their insight of how to deliver successful outcomes in the future.

Good luck with your next feedback session! For contact details and access to coaching, training and development support, please visit the Halland Solutions website : www.hallandsolutions.com

About the author:

Barbara Bradbury is a personal and organisational development consultant, trainer and coach. She is a highly experienced change agent and is passionate about improving patient & client care. She contributes to this by facilitating and supporting the personal / professional development of both clinicians and managers in the health & social care sectors.

