

How to give effective feedback



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When was the last time you criticised or complimented someone? Or perhaps more importantly, can you think of any occasions on which you could or should have said something to a colleague but didn't?

Being able to give feedback is one of the most useful but underused or abused skills we can deploy in the workplace. Few people enjoy giving negative feedback, but I often say to managers that they should think of feedback as a gift. If you don't criticise someone, that person could continue to make the same mistake or carry on doing things more slowly than they might otherwise. Think about it this way: if *you* were doing something wrongly or poorly, wouldn't you want someone to give you the gift of insight and tell you?

And of course not all feedback needs to be negative. Positive feedback – praise or recognition – is just as important for telling colleagues that they're doing a good job.

So how can we get better at giving effective feedback? Here are three simple principles.

Begin by asking yourself why you want to give someone feedback. You should only ever speak up for one of two reasons: you either want to reinforce a good behaviour or help someone to change an ineffective one. Any other reason and perhaps you shouldn't say anything. Too often, people give feedback even when the recipient already knows there was a problem; in such cases the aim is really to say "I told you so". That only creates resentment so don't do it.

Specify only the behaviours you observed. You can't know how someone was feeling. So don't say "you were angry". The recipient of your feedback could easily retort "No I wasn't, I was passionate" or "I was only being insistent." By debating someone's intent, you get diverted from your goal in giving feedback.

Instead, report only the words that the individual said or the behaviours that you saw, for example “You shook your head and spoke much more loudly than you usually do” or “You hardly spoke during that meeting at all”. By describing not only what was said but also how it was said, your aim here is to keep things factual and dispassionate.

Explain the impact the individual's behaviour had on you. Say “I felt shocked by how loudly you spoke” or “I felt disappointed that you didn't say more” or whatever else you thought or felt. The benefit of saying “I felt...” or “I thought...” is that it can't be debated. The recipient of your feedback simply can't argue about your personal thoughts or feelings.

When giving positive feedback, simply sharing a positive message is enough. But if your feedback is negative, the two of you still need to work out how to handle such a situation in future. But at least these three principles will allow you to have raised the issue in as non-confrontational a way as possible. And that is a better start than most people do when it comes to criticising others.