

CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

The process of receiving and giving feedback allows us to see ourselves as others see us and to let others know how we see them. Receiving feedback allows a person to consider their current behavior and make choices about behavior in the future. The term, originally used in electrical engineering, refers to a process in which the outputs of a system are fed back into the system and become inputs, in order to regulate the system's performance.

Feedback about people's behaviors consists of verbal or nonverbal communication providing a person with information *from the perspective of the person giving the feedback*. People often give feedback without thinking about how to do so effectively. They may not even be aware that they are giving feedback at times, through body language or seemingly unrelated communications.

The following guidelines are given to make the feedback process intentional and constructive.

Some criteria for useful feedback

- **It is specific rather than general.** To be told that one "always interrupts" will probably not be as useful as to be told that "just now when we were deciding the issues, you didn't let Bill or Sasha finish their sentences, and you left to get a drink of water when Chi-Ling was talking."
- **It is descriptive rather than evaluative.** By describing what has been observed, it gives the person receiving feedback as much useful information as possible. Avoiding evaluative or judgmental language (for example, saying "you're rude") reduces the need for the individual receiving feedback to react defensively.
- **It acknowledges the subjective perspective of the person giving the feedback.** Good feedback is framed with "I" statements that describe both the event and how the person giving the feedback reacted. "I feel disrespected when you arrive late, and you've been late three of the last four times we met."
- **It is directed towards behavior which the receiver can do something about.** Frustration is only increased when a person is reminded of some shortcoming over which they have no control.
- **It is well timed.** In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior, depending of course on the person's readiness to hear, the support available from others, etc.
- **It is checked to ensure clear communication.** One way of doing this is to have the receiver try to rephrase the feedback she or he has received to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind.
- **When feedback is given in a group setting, both giver and receiver have the opportunity to check with others in the group about the accuracy of the feedback.** Is this one person's impression or an impression shared by others?

Feedback, then, is a way of giving help; it is a corrective mechanism for the individual who wants to learn how well behavior matches their intentions; and it is a means of establishing one's identity.

How to share observations through giving feedback

Constructive feedback is meant to help the person who is receiving it. It should be given with an attitude of caring, not judgment. The person giving feedback should not seem to be trying to prove that they know better. Rapport and trust will help to keep the receiver from feeling alienated. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only your own needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end.

Feedback is more easily accepted when the receiver has formulated the kind of question which those observing them can answer and has invited the feedback. When feedback is given without an "invitation," the person giving feedback should be especially attentive to how the feedback is delivered so that it can be productive.

Be selective in what you comment on. You can observe numerous things, but you must choose those that will be most helpful to the other person. Do not share everything. Use your judgment in sharing two or three most important points that the receiver can build on.

It also helps to be balanced in the feedback provided. Share some observations about things you responded to positively as well as those that you responded to negatively.

How to receive feedback

If feedback is to be useful, the receiver must know how to listen to it:

Keep an attitude of receptiveness. The observer is sharing what they saw and heard in order to be helpful to you. If you listen actively, there may be things to learn.

Discriminate. You do not have to do anything with what you hear. It may or may not be relevant. Let yourself hear it; then judge its value to you.

Listen and don't defend. It's easy to feel that you have to respond or defend yourself. You don't: just listen. If you don't understand, ask for clarification.

Know your limits. If you find yourself becoming overloaded or responding with emotions that you may not be able to control, it is okay to bring a discussion to an end.

Remember. Do what you can to increase your memory of what has been said to you.

The more you focus on observation and feedback skills, the more effective you will be at communicating.