

Giving Effective Feedback

There's an old saying, 'No one comes to work to do a bad job' (regardless of how difficult they might be), and it's well worth remembering that when you are giving feedback. If delivered well, feedback can be a key driver for the continuous improvement and retention of people.

Giving feedback is one of the hardest things we have to do as a manager and if you can master the art of doing it well, it will result in less issues, a more respectful and productive team, more fun, and a happier workplace.

It's good to remember, if done well, people generally enjoy feedback and look forward to conversations, even if at times it involves more challenging subjects. Most people want to know where they stand.

Learning is enhanced by constructive feedback, understanding the things others appreciate us for and perceive as our strengths, and greater insight in to those things we don't do so well. When feedback is delivered well, with a positive learning focus and no blame, it creates a work environment people thrive in.

Formal feedback is usually given once or twice a year as part of a performance or development review process. Informal feedback or on-the-job feedback can be as and when required, for instance, multiple times a day or less frequently.

While formal feedback is very important, timely and specific informal feedback provides a solid framework for ongoing growth and development. To be fair to the recipient, timely feedback is essential so that the examples are fresh in their mind and they are able to make changes or enjoy a sense of a job well done.

Tips for giving effective feedback

1. **Location** – It's good to think about how the individual will react to the specific feedback and consciously choose the location for the best result. Respecting a person's right to privacy is important. Most individual feedback, certainly anything that is about areas for improvement, is usually best delivered in private. Positive public comments are usually a good idea, although as a manager it's important to be consistent with all your team and not find you are inadvertently creating favourites.
2. **Timing** – It's usually best to give feedback as close as possible to the event to which it relates, but do allow sufficient time to ensure clarification can be sought and specifics

discussed without rushing. The 24-hour rule is a great thing if you are tired, unwell, upset or annoyed. If waiting another day doesn't matter, use the time to get in the right frame of mind and create calm, so that you don't end up damaging a good relationship. In the workplace, this is essential.

3. **Suspend Judgment** – It's very easy to leap in without knowing both sides of the story and then really wish you hadn't. Start by asking the person to talk about how they are finding things, e.g., "It looks like you're working later than you should be each day, can you tell me how your workload is and what is taking up your time?", "What do you think needs to happen?", "Is there an end in sight?", etc.
4. **Listen and watch** – Often it's the things that people aren't saying, or can't say, that are really important to help you understand. There will be many verbal and non-verbal cues when you deliver feedback. You will need to listen and watch carefully to ensure you catch them, and to convey that you care about the other person's opinions.
5. **Delivery** – Take the time to think about how you want to come across. Feedback delivered in a kind, calm, rational way is much more likely to get a positive response and help the person stay open, so they can hear what is being said and take it on board. Specific, clearly explained feedback is the most effective. Examples are invaluable for illustrating and clarifying your message and providing context. Direct observations work best. Don't clutter your communication, to overly soften the message, so it gets lost. It's inadvisable to bring up historic events with no bearing on the existing issue.
6. **Tasks or behaviour, not person** – Focus on the relevant task and, if necessary, the behaviour rather than the person, to reduce the risk of the recipient feeling attacked and becoming defensive. Give good clear examples of what you're talking about and be sure they have understood. You might want to ask them to take notes or confirm back to you the key points they will take away from the meeting, especially where impending deadlines are involved.
7. **Avoid generalisations** – Avoid using words like "always" and "never". Generalisations are rarely accurate and can easily come across as aggressive. They tend to escalate the emotion of the situation encouraging defensive behaviour.
8. **Structure and content** – There's a helpful term, 'sandwich', which is a great way to remember how the structure and content of your conversation will go when you are delivering difficult feedback. Start with something genuinely positive about their contribution, talk about the more challenging areas, and then finish your sandwich with

another positive remark so they leave the meeting with a good feeling. Try to separate issues if there is more than one, and deal with each in turn.

9. **Don't undermine your good work** – Always try to avoid following positives with “but” and running straight into a negative comment. This completely diminishes the power of the positive feedback you have just given. When you've delivered a difficult message, or something that is very serious, it's very unwise to keep talking about the subject and potentially weaken or change the message. Move the conversation on.
10. **Make sure you own it** – To be credible and avoid looking like you are either weak or throwing someone else under the bus, it's really important you own the feedback. Your people are likely to struggle to respect you if you are trying to give the impression you are only the messenger. You are a manager representing the company. If you don't like a message you have been asked to deliver, discuss the issue with the person who asked you to deliver it or your manager. If you can't own it, say so or make it clear you do not agree and do not wish to deliver it.
11. **Be constructive** – Always make feedback future focused by including some ideas on how things could be done differently going forward. It's a good idea to include the bigger picture and how their contribution fits in. It's a common trap to take over and solve the problem for the person, when you should be helping them work out how to do it themselves. So take care to check you haven't overstepped the mark.
12. **Be a consistent communicator** - The best companies create a culture of ongoing discussion and feedback. If quality feedback happens all the time, it becomes the norm and moves to being the culture. Issues are minimised, performance is optimised, and people are happy to come to work. Ideas and innovation are critical in today's competitive market place. So having the capability to develop human resource, and encouraging ongoing improvement in all aspects of the organisation, is a highly commercial and necessary approach.
13. **Reality** – Don't always expect everyone to be happy and positive about feedback. Managing people is a complex skill and people can often have very challenging lives at work and at home. Focus on maintaining constructive, professional standards that show respect for the recipient. That way, no matter the outcome, you have performed appropriately.

Giving feedback can be daunting. If that's the case:

- Think about the feedback you have received over the years. What worked best for you and what didn't work? What style of delivery would match this situation and feel more natural for you to deliver. Think about how you would like to be treated if the roles were reversed.
- Take a good amount of time to think through your feedback before you give it, especially if tricky. However, try not to write a complete script as it can sound contrived and things don't always go completely to plan, so flexibility is important.
- Don't react to a situation or event, especially if emotions are involved. You can always make a time to meet with a person later in the day when both parties have had time to cool off and think.
- Talk to colleagues who have a reputation for being good at giving feedback. What are their tips?
- With the right person, and when the time is right, ask the person you gave feedback to to give you some feedback. It will give you specifics for your own learning, and build trust with those around you.