



Feedback Principles

Developed in the field by educators affiliated with NSRF.

Giving Feedback

Constructive feedback is indispensable to productive collaboration. Positive feedback is easy to give and receive; when the response highlights a need to improve it is harder to say and much harder to hear. When it is done properly, feedback is a very specific kind of communication: it focuses on sharing with another person the impact of their behavior and its purpose is to help that person become more effective. Feedback is most useful when it is *audible*, *credible*, and *actionable*. Following the guidelines below will help you achieve that goal.

Give it with care. To be useful, feedback requires the giver to want to help, not hurt, the other person.

Let the recipient invite it. Feedback is most effective when the receiver has invited the comments. Doing so indicates that the receiver is ready to hear the feedback and gives that person an opportunity to specify areas of interest and concern.

Be specific. Good feedback deals clearly with particular incidents and behavior. Making vague or woolly statements is of little value. The most helpful feedback is concrete and covers the area of interest specified by the receiver.

Include feelings. Effective feedback requires more than a simple statement of observed behaviors. It is important to express how you felt so that the receiver can judge the full impact of the behavior being discussed. For example, you might say, "When you come late to meetings, I feel angry and frustrated because ..."

Avoid evaluative judgments. The most useful feedback describes behaviors without value labels such as "irresponsible", "unprofessional", or even "good" and "bad". If the recipient asks you to make a judgment, be sure to state clearly that this is *your* opinion.

Speak for yourself. When giving feedback, be sure to discuss only things you have witnessed. Do not refer to absent or anonymous people (e.g. "A lot of people didn't like it").

Pick an appropriate time and place. The most useful feedback is given at a time and in a place that make it easy for the receiver to hear it, e.g., away from other people and distractions. It should also be given sufficiently close to the particular event being discussed for the event to be fresh in the mind.

Make the feedback readily actionable. To be most useful, feedback should concern behavior that can be changed by the receiver. Feedback concerning matters outside the control of the receiver is less useful and often causes resentment.

Giving Feedback: Summary

1. Find out and respond to the receiver's concerns.
2. Be specific about the behavior and your reactions.
3. Speak for yourself only.
4. Don't evaluate.
5. Help the receiver figure out how to act on your feedback.

Receiving Feedback

Breathe. This may seem overly simple, but remembering to do it can make a difference. Our bodies are conditioned to react to stressful situations as if they were physical assaults (e.g. muscles tense, breathing becomes shallow and rapid, etc.). Taking full breaths will help your body to relax and your brain to focus.

Specify the behavior about which you want feedback. The more specific you can be about the feedback you want, the more likely you are to be able to act upon it. For example, if you want to know how students reacted to an assignment, ask, "What did the students in the small group you observed do after I finished answering their questions?" rather than, "How did it go?"

Listen carefully. Don't interrupt or discourage the person giving feedback. Don't defend yourself ("It wasn't my fault ... ") and don't justify ("I only did that because ... ").

Clarify your understanding of the feedback. You need to get clear feedback in order for it to be helpful. Ask for specific examples, e.g. "Can you describe what I do or say that makes me appear aggressive to you?"

Summarize your understanding of the feedback. Paraphrase the message in your own words to be sure you have heard and understood what was said.

Take time to sort out what you heard. You may need time to think about what was said and how you feel about it or to check with others before responding to the feedback. This is a normal response but should not be used as an excuse to avoid the issue.

Check out possible responses with the person who gave you feedback. A good way to pre-test an alternative approach to a situation that has caused problems for you in the past is to ask the person who gave the feedback if they think it will be more effective. That provides a first screen, and makes the feedback-giver feel heard.

Receiving Feedback: Summary

1. Be specific about the feedback that you want.
2. Be open to the feedback:
 - a) don't ask for it if you don't want to know
 - b) avoid defensiveness
 - c) don't justify
3. Clarify/check your understanding of the feedback.
4. Summarize your understanding of the feedback.
5. Share your reaction to the feedback.