

Training for Effective Feedback

Feedback” can be defined as “information about past or current performance that guides a person to maintain or change a specific behaviour.”

Giving and receiving feedback is a life skill we use frequently at work and at home. Sometimes we give and receive feedback in a training session, while at other times we give feedback to colleagues during the business day. Just think about all the times you give casual feedback: “Hey, Bruce, good meeting!” Or, “Marcie, this report needs work.” Even, “Mom, great dinner!” is informal feedback.

But has anyone ever taught you how to give feedback professionally? Have you ever evaluated how well you deliver feedback? In today’s team environment, business people have to communicate good and not-so-good news to their direct reports, their peers and leaders daily.

When such feedback is well given and well taken you can expect to see higher productivity, fewer mistakes and higher morale.

Consequently, there is a resurgence of interest in giving and receiving effective feedback and trainers are responding. Here are some strategies that will help you to deliver successful training programs that develop this skill.

Anticipate mild resistance

Typically, participants think they already know all about feedback and they’ll let you know either directly or through their body language. Because they give feedback all day long and usually get the results they need they don’t want a complex, time-consuming model, so your first steps are to:

- acknowledge their experience and
- validate their success

Define the framework

Frame the course as a “refresher.” Let participants know that it is an opportunity to take stock, review and upgrade. You’ll be asking them to self-evaluate and set one small goal for improvement. Set aside time for participants to:

- assess their skill and
- identify one area for development

Work from a model

There are many models available. The model I use is the observations/thoughts/feelings/wants model. Both positive and constructive feedback are more meaningful when we express our observations, thoughts, feelings and wants. Here are some examples of how the model works:

1. “Hey Bruce, I noticed that you came to the meeting with an agenda. I think that helped you stay focused and finish the meeting on time. I was so grateful to be done by 3 p.m. I really want you to come prepared with an agenda every week.”
2. “Marcie, I see that this report doesn’t have the categories that are usually found in year-end reports. I think that will make it harder for people to compare this year’s results with last year’s. I’m concerned that you didn’t follow the format we talked about. I’d like you to re-do those pages that have missing categories.”
3. “Hi Mom, it’s great that you made a beef dish and a vegetable dish for Sunday dinner. It really helps those of us who want to stay away from red meat. Personally, I was delighted to have the choice.

Familiarize participants with the model and ask them to use it many times throughout the training. Demonstrate the model by using it in a natural, conversational way. Participants can practise:

- writing out the feedback
- delivering feedback aloud in pairs and
- practising the skill in triads

Demonstrate and discuss the benefits of the more structured approach

When you use a more structured approach like this:

- People will be more likely to give you what you want the next time.
- It’s more likely that you will describe behaviour and not become judgmental.
- People will feel less defensive.

Frame the model as part of the learning curve

Using a model like the four-part one above may sound cumbersome initially.

Remind people that it takes time to become comfortable with any new skill.

Tips you might share with participants are to:

- practise out loud
- use contractions to sound less formal
- use a tone of voice that sounds natural
- watch out for non-verbals

Feedback can easily be waylaid when verbal and nonverbal messages are even slightly mixed. This is when self-assessment and peer feedback are critical in the training program.

For example, when giving positive or constructive feedback, do you:

- look away from the person?
- sound or look apologetic?
- smile or laugh from your own discomfort?

Strong body language is crucial to delivering effective feedback, so review these common pitfalls and best practices for assertive non-verbal communication.

Be sure to pay attention to tone of voice, gestures, eye contact, posture and physical proximity. Structure the practice session to include feedback on non-verbal delivery.

Frame “role-playing” as “skills practice”

Many participants shy away from “role-playing.” Framing role-playing as “an opportunity to practise this skill” gives it a positive twist. Divide participants into groups of three, in which one participant is the feedback giver (FG), one receives feedback (FR) and one observes (O).

After a relevant case study exercise, the FG practises self-assessment — “This is what I did well; this is what I can do better next time.” The FR and the O practise giving feedback to the FG. The FG receives the feedback non-defensively. Everyone has a turn at each position.



Can you take it as well as you give it?

Feedback training also provides an excellent opportunity to review the guidelines for receiving feedback without defensiveness. All professionals need to review what's expected of them when on the receiving end of feedback. Framing the following guidelines for receiving feedback as “professionalism” will help participants feel less defensive.

- Listen actively.
- Own what you believe to be true.
- Thank the giver for the feedback.

Whether you deliver a training program on effective feedback, whether you are a trainer of other courses who both gives and receives general feedback from participants, or whether you are a professional seeking to upgrade your own communication skills, these guidelines will serve you well.

The Training Report©

January 2009

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