

Thriving Workplace

Giving Constructive Feedback

In the context of this discussion, feedback is information provided to individuals about their workplace practices or performance for the purpose of (a) directing, reinforcing, encouraging or improving progress towards specific performance criteria; (b) shaping and enhancing relationships with co-workers and customers; or (c) developing and releasing capacity. Feedback may be provided during routine supervision, coaching, on-the-job training, performance review meetings and other formal and informal performance development practices, or during or following everyday exchanges with customers.

There are three main strands to the case for giving high-quality constructive workplace feedback within both organisational procedures and individual practices:

- 1 Methodical management and supervision of performance requires feedback on performance to keep practices and relationships within acceptable boundaries. *Formative* feedback is given day-to-day as necessary. *Summative* feedback is provided at longer intervals as part of periodic performance evaluation, action-reflection learning, and planning. **Where feedback on services provided isn't routinely given, it should be methodically sought from the customers of those services; and where service providers don't routinely seek feedback, it should be offered.**
- 2 Our capacity for good work is significantly enhanced when our efforts and we are acknowledged. Both *positive* and *negative* feedback given at the right time in ways that are easy to hear, is usually supportive, moving both performance and relationships helpfully forward.
- 3 Those who go out of their way to appreciate our efforts and output, even if only with simple words of sincere thanks, go far beyond the limits of performance appraisal systems or conventional customer client relationships: they nourish a sense of self-worth, encourage further striving and build intrinsic rewards into the work itself.

Observations of Common Practice

- Many people avoid providing negative feedback because it involves confronting (facing up to) differences (conflicts) of needs, values and expectations, and triggers historical anxieties (fear) they hold about conflict.
- Customers of service-provision often actively avoid giving honest negative feedback directly to the service-provider, though they will freely offer their opinions to others.
- Providers of service often actively avoid seeking feedback from their customers, and this avoidance is common amongst leaders and managers; many provide limited opportunity or none for comment on the quality of their leadership and management practices from the people they lead and manage.

On-target, Off-target, Corrective, Recommended or Commended?

Some people prefer to avoid describing differing kinds of feedback as *negative* or *positive*; while others try not to distinguish between the two. For the sake of clarity I use *negative* and *positive*. Use whatever terms you are comfortable with **but** make sure the recipients of your feedback understand the difference between what you like and what you don't. Misunderstanding about this is common.

- Much so-called constructive criticism or feedback is unhelpful and even damaging.
- Unprompted feedback that is useful, is uncommon.
- Spontaneous feedback is predominantly negative.
- Where spontaneous feedback includes positive comments, it usually reports them as unhelpful generalisations and judgements.
- When asked to give feedback, most people interpret the request as an invitation to make only negative comments.

Characteristics of Constructive Feedback

Giving constructive¹ feedback is a self-expressive interpersonal communication skill whose specific language and attitudes are helpfully guided by the mnemonic **HEARD**: Honest, Explicit, Authentic, Respectful and Direct:²

Honest	Truthful.
Explicit	Clear. Distinctly expressing all that is meant, leaving nothing merely implied or suggested.
Authentic	Original, first-hand. Speaks for the speaker, not for or about others.
Respectful	Equally sensitive to and considerate of both parties' need to be treated with dignity as an equal human being.
Direct	Straightforward. To the point.

Feedback is easiest for others to hear and understand when it conforms to those guidelines and when –

- The other party is receptive to it.
- It is well-timed.
- It is of sufficient (rather than excessive or insufficient) quantity.
- It describes and pin-points actual events and specific behaviours.
- It is directed towards behaviour the recipient can control or influence.
- It evenly balances attention to both negative and positive aspects of performance.

Best Given When Receptive

Feedback is most valuable when the recipient has asked for it or has indicated openness to it, and most valuable when some specific issue, need or problem has given rise to the request. Feedback imposed when the recipient is clearly not open to hearing it, does not fit the equal respect requirement of the HEARD guidelines; it may meet only the giver's need to punish, hurt or to off-load (their own guilt, for example). It may be evidence of the giver's failure to take responsibility for problem-solving. This won't improve a relationship. Even positive feedback, when imposed, may meet only the giver's need – to be seen as pleasant or affable, for example, and may arouse the recipient's suspicions.

¹ Constructive: serving to improve, build, advance.

² This is from my management guidebook, *Hear and Be Heard - the Heart of Dialogue*.

The most important question about giving feedback is, *What is this for?*

Before delivering it, check your purpose by asking, *What's my motive? What am I trying to achieve here?*

Supervisors and others in positions of influence have a legitimate mandate to give feedback to those they supervise. This degree of power over others carries with it a responsibility to exercise that power with particular care. Any relationship that has an underlying power imbalance can easily trigger *fight or flight* urges and behaviours – in either or both parties. It is especially easy to regress into immature behaviours when faced with the need to give or to receive negative feedback. Check the other's receptivity and the appropriateness of your timing.

Well-timed

Feedback is most useful when it is fresh; provided as soon after the behaviour as it can be given. Try not to store it up for later use. Dragging-up history when giving *negative* feedback is particularly unfair; it runs the risk of triggering counter-productive resentment or guilt, which may be expressed as anger, defensiveness or withdrawal.³

If this guideline were followed, staff undergoing formal performance review would hear nothing new. Their feedback would be in the form of a summary of what they have already heard through formative feedback provided on-the-job; matters that have already been discussed, close to the time of their occurrence.

Even if the behaviour repeats something that has happened before, confine your feedback to the most recent event. Old occurrences are stale, and reference to them, in most cases, can be safely omitted.

Sufficient

Avoid over-loading people with a lot of negative feedback, even if they claim to be *up for it*. They may switch off or react negatively. Pick the most important matters, and schedule further sessions if necessary.

Don't over-do it. When you become aware that others are beginning to tune-out, feel uncomfortable or distressed, consider that although you originally *owned the problem* (which is why you were giving feedback), they are now experiencing a problem and are listening primarily to themselves. Pause and help them express or otherwise deal with their thoughts and feelings. There is no point in continuing to give feedback when it is obvious that the recipient is busily engaged with and processing their own turmoil.

If in doubt about whether to speak or listen, follow this guideline: *listen first to understand, before trying to be understood*. You can return to your original issue if it is still relevant and you need to say more, when the other is clearly ready to hear and understand you. Later, you could initiate a discussion about what would make the feedback process easier for them.

Descriptive

By reporting specific, observable behaviours and by describing these with detachment and objectivity, we minimise the complexity of the interaction and the possibility of defensiveness and disagreement. We make it easier for the other to hear what we intend.

For example:

³ If this happens, the intended recipients will be listening to themselves, not to the speaker. If your objective was to have them hear, understand and consider your feedback, you'll have shot yourself in the foot instead.

Not this . . .	But this . . .
<i>This is very shallow work that shows immature thinking.</i>	<i>Your report repeats arguments that are in the public domain, but does not analyse the situation with the models we favour here. I need you to write it from these perspectives . . .</i>

Positive feedback all too often consists of easy, glib praise and compliments such as *Great! Fantastic! Very good!* or *Awesome!* This might leave the other with a good feeling but little in the way of helpful information. To reinforce desirable behaviours, positive feedback needs to let the person know precisely what it is that is appreciated. So:

Not this . . .	But this . . .
<i>That was a good speech.</i>	<i>You spoke distinctly and slowly and I could hear you clearly from the back of the room. I liked your summary of the main points in your conclusion. I enjoyed the humour you introduced at the start - it helped me concentrate. I'm glad you stopped to ask questions. I admire the careful way, you organised the sequence of points. Well done!</i>

Negative feedback is also more effective when generalisations, blanket judgements, emotive terms and labels about another's character, personality or qualities are avoided: terms such as *bad, totally useless, lazy, completely dense, slow, dumb, thoughtless, dithering, sloppy, careless, unmotivated, clumsy, inconsiderate, foolish, incompetent*, for example. With some thought, these can be replaced with constructive expressions which conform to the HEARD guidelines and are more easily heard. For example:

Not this . . .	But this . . .
<i>You're hopeless with your reports. They're never on time.</i>	<i>I asked for your report on the new system to be in to me by the 12th. It didn't reach me until the 14th. This has delayed my part in the project. I'd like to know what caused this.</i>
<i>You attacked me.</i>	<i>When you shouted That's pathetic! I felt hurt and found it hard to listen to you.</i>
<i>I've caught you cheating on your timesheet.</i>	<i>Your timesheet shows you went for lunch at 12, yet I saw you in the lunchroom at 11:30. I'd like you to explain why that was.</i>
<i>You were obviously very embarrassed.</i>	<i>I noticed that you didn't look at him; you shuffled your feet, clicked your pain, became red in the face and frowned.</i>
<i>That's very childish!</i>	<i>I don't like you leaving fictitious messages on my voicemail.</i>

Not this . . .	But this . . .
<i>You work very inefficiently.</i>	<i>I want you to follow the guidelines in the desk file, to speed up the process.</i>

Judgements are not always labels; they may include *Shoulds* and *Shouldn'ts* and sound like an old school report:

Not this . . .	But this . . .
<i>You could do much better.</i>	<i>I want you to completely all the entries in the prescribed way.</i>
<i>You've let me down.</i>	<i>I'm concerned that you didn't attend the meeting.</i>
<i>You should have studied the manual.</i>	<i>When you use a different procedure each time you put the reliability of results at risk . . .</i>
<i>You shouldn't waste so much time.</i>	<i>I'd like you to design a generic template to speed up your proposal writing.</i>

Specific

Constructive feedback pinpoints specific events and circumstances to help the recipient identify and distinguish the occasion or incident referred to.

Not this . . .	But this . . .
<i>Your face didn't match what you were saying.</i>	<i>What you say to him about the report was serious, but you smiled as you said it.</i>
<i>Your eye contact was good.</i>	<i>You looked at her directly all the time she was speaking to you.</i>
<i>You disrupt our meetings.</i>	<i>At this morning's meeting, you talk over Marie's presentation.</i>
<i>A flash of your usual brilliance!</i>	<i>I'm impressed by your ability to summarise the main points during this morning's discussion.</i>
<i>I'm disappointed in you.</i>	<i>I'd hoped you wouldn't repeat this error.</i>

Authentic and Direct

You can see from these specific suggestions above, that the examples I discourage are often neither honest and truthful, nor explicit and clear. Here are some illustrations of feedback that lack **authenticity**:

Some people don't like it when you . . . (when the speaker is actually expressing his/her own views).

Others would find it difficult if you did that . . . (when the speaker is expressing his/her own views or is simply imagining others' perspectives).

I don't mind at all but I know others are offended . . . (when the speaker is disguising his/her own views).

I can't say who, exactly, but you've upset some people . . . (when the speaker is taking responsibility for other problems).

Here are some illustrations of feedback that is not **direct**:

You might want to take a look at the way you're doing that . . . (when the speaker intends, *I'd like you to do it differently*).

Do you know how others feel about this . . . ? (when the speaker knows or is concerned that others feel negatively about it).

I'm not sure you're doing that the best way . . . (when the speaker believes it is not the best way).

You've got a problem with that . . . (when it's actually the speaker who has a problem with it).

That leaves one last category to explain, in the HEARD mnemonic: constructive feedback is respectful of both parties.

Respectful

Feedback can be destructive when it serves only our own needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. Any communication that is disrespectful of those intended to hear and understand it is in fact, difficult to hear and understand. Negative feedback especially, is difficult to listen to; why make the process even more complex by indicating disrespect? We can avoid shooting ourselves in the proverbial foot (or any other foot) by taking care to ensure that our feedback is perceived as respectful, whether positive or negative (and whatever the attitude of the intended recipient).

A focus on only our needs might be demonstrated by introducing feedback with the following phrases (though they are not definitively disrespectful and may indicate other things such as anxiety):

I probably shouldn't be saying this . . .

I don't want to hurt you, but . . .

I hope you won't take this personally, but . . .

I think you should know what people are saying about you . . .

You probably won't like me saying this, but . . .

I know you said that you didn't want to hear any more about this, but I need to tell you . . .

I don't want to nag, but . . .

Check your goals. What is this for, really?

Similarly, an imbalanced focus on our own needs might be demonstrated by commenting on behaviours, circumstances or characteristics that are outside of the other person's ability to control or influence. People's sense of impotence and frustration is only increased when we do. For example:

I know you don't make the rules round here, but . . .

I realise that it's your job to set the strategy, however . . .

This isn't strictly within your area, but I thought I'd just mention . . .

Balance Attention to Negative and Positive

Given that almost everybody sets out to work (and elsewhere in their lives) determined to do their best and generally do so, simply harping on about their faults and mistakes points to a certain dishonesty or to a limited view of human behaviours and our ability to comment honestly about them.

We would have an alarming picture of life and a limited understanding of its fullness and diversity if we limited ourselves to what the daily news media presents us with. An equally narrow and distorted view of other people arises from our searching for and pointing out, in the name of *honesty*, only the disagreeable traits we observe in them,

Not only is a predominant focus on giving negative feedback likely to be somewhat dishonest, doing so is another really effective way of shooting ourselves in the foot. If the effect of our approach, the words we use or their unbalanced focus on negative is to trigger the others' despondency, resentment, distraction, guilt, anger or low-self-esteem, we have wasted our efforts and created other problems. Constructive feedback makes **both** negative and positive observations when both are in issue. What's more, if we leaven negative with positive feedback, it can also make the negative easier to hear.

Which First?

However, beware of routinely giving the positive first before launching into the negative, as many people do. That practice goes like this:

Ted, I've been really pleased with some aspects of your work lately, particularly the WestWing project . . . (not-very-specific brief generalisations), however . . . Your shoddy blah, bad timekeeping blah blah, and ability to juggle while walking on your hands will have to improve if you're to . . . blah blah blah. . . (mixture of point-by-point judgements, generalisations, specific descriptions and implied threats . . .

I've actually seen written advice to use this negative first, positive next sequence, and heard people say that if you have to give someone negative feedback, *first butter them up before you chop them off at the knees!* So common is the technique that almost everyone I've tested it with knows for certain that the buttering-up precedes the **real** message. The recipient's internal self-talk is something like, *Yeah, yeah, cut the crap and get to the point.* They don't bother listening to the positives offered first, believing that it's only a social convention or used as part of the other's inability to be direct.

My preference is to give negative first followed by the positive – and to **always** have genuine positive comments to make. My second preference (and I will assess each case on its merits to make this choice), is to make a positive-negative-positive *sandwich* of delivering the feedback. I want to formulate and present my feedback in such ways that it will be easily heard and understood (the first goal of self-expression). I've found that people are more likely to take-in and process the negative if they understand (especially from their long-term experience of the relationship) that it will be followed by good-quality **positive** observations. However, much depends on how this sequence is presented and prefaced. Here's my "standard" approach:

I want to give you some feedback about your work today. I've got some negative things and some positive things to comment on. Is now a good time? (If not, I negotiate a mutually suitable appointment.) I'll tell you my negatives first, then the positive. I'll deal with each item separately . . .

. . . Please stop me at any point if you're unclear about what I mean or if you need to comment before I go on, OK?

Examples of Constructive Negative Feedback

Not this . . .	But this . . .
<i>Your behaviour is sexist.</i>	<i>When Marie suggested an alternative process, you did not acknowledge her. When Marco suggested the same thing, later, you said, That a great idea!</i>
<i>You're work's not up to scratch.</i>	<i>I'm concerned about your leaving unfinished welds in the seams this morning.</i>
<i>You'll have to improve your writing.</i>	<i>I find it hard to read your handwritten reports. Please type them or print them. Can you?</i>
<i>I feel you could do better.</i>	<i>At the meeting I noticed that you talked of Judith while she was presenting her paper, and when John spoke about his trip to Lisbon you cut over him to talk about your trip to Balclutha.</i>
<i>This area's like a pigsty!</i>	<i>Please put the discards in the bin and sweep the shaving off the floor at least every hour.</i>
<i>You ought to know better.</i>	<i>I don't like it when you do this . . . Please do it this way instead . . . So that . . . (comment on the improvement in which changes will result).</i>
<i>Can't you do better than that?</i>	<i>I want you to do it the way I showed you. Is there some reason why you can't?</i>
<i>This place is a shambles!</i>	<i>Please stop what you're doing and file all the papers you've finished with, in the cabinet.</i>
<i>I think you've got a problem.</i>	<i>I've got a problem. When you do that . . . it makes it difficult for me to . . . Please do it differently or at some other time. Is that possible?</i>
<i>You need training in communication skills.</i>	<i>While you were speaking to Andrew he seemed to become quite upset but you kept telling him what you wanted. I suggest you stop speaking as soon as you notice this, next time, and help him speak about his concerns before you continue.</i>
<i>You managers are all the same.</i>	<i>Today, when you got Andrea to do something for you, she was working on something vital to our team's progress and it caused a delay. Please check with me before you involve my team in your work. Would you do that?</i>
<i>You've got a lot to learn.</i>	<i>I'm concerned about this. How can we see that it doesn't happen again?</i>

Not this . . .	But this . . .
<i>Your quarterly results are very disappointing.</i>	<i>I'm concerned about these results. I'd like you to work with me on a recovery plan.</i>
<i>You're a difficult person.</i>	<i>You've just told me in three different ways how to complete the task. I'd be happier if you told me only once.</i>
<i>That's really careless. Don't ever do that again!</i>	<i>I'm annoyed that you left confidential client papers in the interview room this morning.</i>
<i>You never learn, do you?</i>	<i>I'm concerned that you seem to use a variety of informal approaches to analysis, rather than the concepts the rest of us apply. I'd like to help you develop a plan for aligning your approach with ours.</i>

Add Impact

One simple way of adding impact to our feedback is to indicate how we have been affected emotionally by the other's behaviour: e.g., *I find that annoying.* Or, *I enjoyed that.*

Another is to include the tangible or practical effects of their behaviour: e.g., *It makes it difficult for me to access the file.* *It makes it really easy for me to understand.*

In the following illustration, the feedback given includes four emotional impact references and three comments on tangible effects, all highlighted:

*Well done! You spoke distinctly and slowly. **I could hear you** very clearly from the back of the room. **I liked** your summarising the main points in your conclusion, **I enjoyed** the humour you introduced at the start – **it helped me concentrate.** **I'm glad** you stopped to ask questions. **I admire** the careful way you'd organised the sequence of points. **I found it easy to follow.***

Common Obstacles to Constructive Feedback

Obstacles	Remedial Attitudes and Practices
Acknowledging and affirming effort is viewed as unimportant, on the basis that <i>They already know (or ought to know) they're doing a good job, and they should be self-managing; if they weren't performing, I'd tell them.</i>	<p>There is always a need to give positive feedback to reinforce effort. Our capacity for good work is significantly enhanced when our efforts and we are acknowledged. Both positive and negative feedback given at the right time in ways that are easy to hear, is usually supportive, moving both performance and relationships helpfully forward.</p> <p>When people go out of their way to appreciate our efforts and output, even if only with simple words of sincere thanks, they nourish a sense of self-worth, encourage further striving and build intrinsic rewards into the work itself.</p>

Obstacles	Remedial Attitudes and Practices
People withhold negative feedback on tasks, projects or other performance on the basis that it may not alter the situation, that it's not important enough, or that it probably won't compromise the overall performance.	This may signal the wrong message and make it more difficult to address future performance gaps. Negative feedback helps people understand how others see them and provides a basis for improvement.
Managers fail to give negative feedback through anxiety that the other may find the information hurtful and difficult to hear. They may tell themselves, <i>I'll speak up when it's really important.</i>	Your job is to hold boundaries. Start where it's easiest and safest – before it becomes a more complex and complicated task. Deal elsewhere with your fear of conflict or with your need to be liked.
Leaders and managers talk about the importance of customer focus (and of measuring customers' perception of quality of service) but fail to treat their staff as customers of their leadership and management practices, thus demonstrating hypocrisy and modelling obstacles to the practices they preach.	Leaders and managers are wise to begin modelling customer feedback in respect of their own practices, routinely and systematically seeking feedback from those who report to them.
Leaders and managers invite feedback from their staff but fail to comprehend how vulnerable staff are about expressing negative feedback and how, therefore, staff will almost always not speak the truth about these matters.	Leaders and managers can introduce safe and confidential processes for obtaining and reporting feedback about their practices. There are very many agencies providing services to facilitate this. ⁴
<i>Limited interpersonal communication and relationships management skills generate unclarity, confusion and unhelpful negative reactions.</i>	<p><i>Constructive feedback requires high levels of interpersonal skills, especially –</i></p> <p>Self-expression that gives impact and easy receptivity to the expression of needs; and that reduces the incidence and levels of destructive conflict.;</p> <p>Listening, to facilitate others' self-expression and deal effectively with resistance, diostress, hostility and problems;</p> <p>Problem-solving processes that aid clarification, resolution, and mutually beneficial outcomes where conflict is involved.</p>

Spot the Good

Over many years I've seen a few leaders, managers, teachers and parents display an uncommon ability to get the best (attitudes and performance) from those they lead, supervise or parent. Deciding they have much to teach me, (for they have all been truly remarkable), I studied their *relationships management* practices and discovered they have one in common; they "spot the good".

⁴ My own, www.EncourageMentors.com, included.

“Spotting the good” involves closely observing the behaviours of those they wish to influence, with a view to finding and commenting positively on desired, helpful or constructive behaviours. They **do** find those behaviours (we get what we look for) and they comment on them (immediately, where possible) and build on those behaviours, helping people continue and extend helpful approaches and attitudes to the next task. They continue to *spot the good* and repeat the sequence.

Imitating this practice myself was very difficult for me when I first decided to implement it, because I’d learned from my childhood, my schooling, and the first 16 years of my employment experience (as a police officer), that a supervisory role requires the reverse attitude: observe others with a view to spotting and remarking on **undesired** behaviours.

In my role as a skills-trainer (for over 30 years) I’ve watched many hundreds of people experience the same difficulty. Tasked with observing a skills-rehearsal then giving constructive feedback on it, they have little difficulty reporting negative performance (though not always reporting it helpfully) but struggle to find and comment on what was “good” about it. It’s one of the most difficult but most useful practices, they would say, they eventually learned from those training programmes.

As I acquired staff in my various businesses over the years, I worked hard to recast my mindset for the supervisory aspects of my role: from *police the negative*, to *spot the good*. By then, my children were past childhood but I found I could practise *spot the good* with them as adults. It’s been part of my routine relationship practices for many years now, with staff, grandchildren and other members of my family, colleagues, friends, contractors, clients, household service-providers; in fact, with everyone possible. Although I sometimes fall into older habits, and at times the recipients of my positive feedback act with surprise (and yes, with a little discomfort occasionally), overall it’s had hugely pleasing consequences, led to very enjoyable exchanges, and much improved performance from those my role calls for me to influence.

Here’s the best bit: although I have no qualms about confronting others with my negative feelings about their behaviours, over that period I’ve needed to provide very much less negative feedback.

*Good **dog**, Spot! Wanna walk?*

Tom Watkins