How To Give Feedback

® Mark Horstman

Ask. By asking a team member whether they are open to some feedback, you give them the opportunity to suggest a different time or place. [They may be busy!] Even if you are comfortable, it is equally important that they are. If they are not, they won't hear you anyway. **Do this whether the feedback is adjusting (negative) or affirming (positive)**.

Many managers don't ask before they give positive feedback, because "everybody likes praise". But then when they do ask, team members evade answering or get nervous, because they assume it's going to be negative. Ask *always*.

> *Ineffective: "Jack, pay attention." "Jack, you've got a problem."*
>
> *More Effective: **"Jack, may I give you some feedback?"** or, "Can I share something with you?"*
>
> **Key words: "May I..."**

Describe specific behavior. Don't attempt to guess at the "motivation" for the behavior. Discuss the actual behavior you saw, heard, or read. You cannot see someone being lazy or having a poor attitude. *You can't!!* You **can** see them being 15 minutes late 3 of the past 5 days. You can see documents with spelling errors. Seeing these **behaviors** only allows you to **infer** their attitude. **Tell them what you saw, hear or read, not what you *inferred*.** Avoid labels.

> *Ineffective: "I'm tired of you ticking people off. I can't cover for you any longer."*
>
> *More Effective: "Jack, when you roll your eyes in meetings when others talk; when you say 'you guys don't get it'; when you come late to meetings and leave in the middle..."*
>
> **Key words: "...When you..."**

Describe the impact of the behavior. Adults understand that actions have consequences. Sometimes team members are aware of their actions' consequences (and they don't care or don't know how to change their actions or the results). Sometimes they are genuinely unaware of negative repercussions. Remember that no one ever acts in a way that they believe is irrational: their behavior always makes sense *to them.* Once you have described what you observed, tell them what you felt or what impact it had on the company, project, or team. A phrase that captures this thought is, "When you do this, here's what happens" or, "When you do this, I feel..."

> *Ineffective: "How come you can't get your reports to me on time lately?"*
>
> *More Effective: "Jack, when you roll your eyes and tell others they "don't get it", here's what happens. We lose good people. You lose opportunities you want, like that last move that you didn't get. I have to*

> *take the time to bail you out, and have to have a hard conversation with you that neither one of us likes. And, I feel that I have to be more careful with future assignments..."*
>
> **Key words: "Here's what happens..."**

Discuss next steps.   Even with affirming/positive feedback, it is most effective to reinforce the *continuation* of the sought after behavior. Being explicit that you want it to continue increases the chances that it will be continued. When the feedback is adjusting/negative, and the recipient has verified that they understand what they did and its impact, it is time to work out how to change the behavior in the future. ***At this point, the recipient must really own their efforts. If you simply impose a change, they will be less likely to enact the change***. Ask open-ended or leading questions to start this process, such as: "What do you think you can do in this area?" "How should we approach this?" "What ideas do you have to improve here?" It is possible that they will have no input, for various reasons. It is still more effective to give them the opportunity once or even twice to start.

> *Ineffective: "So what you need to do, Jack, is control your temper. That's not too much to ask, is it?"*
>
> *More Effective: "What can you do about this? How can I help you?" "Any thoughts on how you can eliminate this minor issue?"*
>
> **Key words: "What are you going to do about this?" Or, for positive feedback, "Thank you – keep it up!"**

Summary

- **"May I give you some feedback? May I share something with you?"** Always ask, positive or negative.

- **"When you..."** Talk about their behavior.

- **"Here's what happens..."** Describe the impact.

- **"How can you do this differently?"** or **"Thanks – keep this up."** For negative feedback, ask *them* to suggest the change.

Feedback is always about future behavior. It's NOT about the past, because there's nothing we can do about the past. We want to get different behavior in the future if it's adjusting. We want more of the same if it's affirming. Do not use adjusting feedback as punishment – your team members know when they've made a mistake, and nobody likes punishment.

If you use this model regularly, making it a habit, your people will start ASKING for more. ***How would that feel?***