

How to Give and Receive Helpful Feedback



Feedback is key to many relationships. Without it we would all live in our bubbles wondering how we are doing. And the chances for learning and improving would be low. But feedback is difficult because it is often given in a negative way that makes us defensive.

Below are some hints about how to work with feedback in a helpful way. However, no matter how good your techniques are for feedback, there must be a certain level of trust. The person you are giving feedback to must be able to see that you are doing it with good intentions. Good techniques can boost that trust but unless there is some trust there already feedback may actually make things worse.

And of course avoid giving feedback if people are not open to hearing it or have not asked for it.

A good feedback relationship has two key elements:

A. Appreciative Feedback

Many of us already know where we are not doing well. What we often do not know is where we are doing well. This may be because of self-confidence problems or excessive humility or because we don't really know what is expected of us. If people are doing well, they need to know it, because if they don't and start to doubt themselves then there is a strong chance that they will stop doing what is working and try others things that may not work.

But, as with any feedback, it must be specific. If you praise me and don't tell me why then I may worry that you are just being nice or trying to flatter me for some unknown reason.

B. Critical Feedback Given in a Challenging Question

Most of us do not like critical feedback even if we know we need it. If we are very close and trust each other no matter what then it is much easier to be quite blunt and direct with feedback to each other. But if not then we need to give critical feedback more delicately, to help the person to hear it. How?

Firstly, make sure they know what is working, i.e. give specific appreciative feedback if you have not already. Secondly, try to offer the critical feedback as a challenging and helpful question. For example:

Instead of saying: "Your reports lack detail and are quite superficial."

You might say: "Is it possible to give us more detail in future and to bring out some of the experiences or even the personal stories to help us to see what is really happening?"

Instead of saying: "We find you too controlling, not giving us enough space to participate."

You might say: "Are there ways that members can participate more, to relieve you of the responsibility of managing everything?"