



Guidelines For Giving And Receiving Feedback

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These white papers provide concepts and ideas based on the application of these principles of these programs and our work with our clients. We welcome your comments and observations on these topics.

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Some of the most important data we can receive from others (or give to others) consists of feedback related to our behavior. Such feedback can provide learning opportunities for each of us if we can use the reactions of others as a mirror for observing the consequences of our behavior. Such personal feedback helps to make us more aware of what we do and how we do it, thus increasing our ability to modify and change our behavior and to become more effective in our interactions with others.

To help us develop and use the techniques of feedback for personal growth, it is necessary to understand certain characteristics of the process. The following is a brief outline of some guidelines that may assist us in making better use of feedback, both as the giver and receiver of feedback. You may wish to add further guidelines.

Focus feedback on behavior rather than the person. It is important that we refer to what a person does rather than comment on what we imagine the person is. This focus on behavior further implies that we use adverbs (which relate to actions) rather than adjectives (which relate to qualities) when referring to a person. Thus we might say a person “talked considerably in this meeting,” rather than that this person “is a loudmouth.” When we talk in terms of “personality traits,” this implies inherited qualities which are difficult, if not impossible, to change. Focusing on behavior implies that it is something related to a specific situation that might be changed. It is less threatening to a person to hear comments about behavior than about “traits.”

Focus feedback on observations rather than inferences. Observations refer to what we can see or hear in the behavior of another person, while inferences refer to interpretations or conclusions that we make from what we see or hear. In a sense, inferences or conclusions about a person contaminate our observations, thus clouding the feedback for another person. When inferences or conclusions are shared, and it may be valuable to have such data, it is important that they be so identified.

Focus feedback on description rather than judgment. The effort to describe represents a process for reporting what occurred, while judgment entails a subjective evaluation in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, nice or not nice. Judgments arise out of a personal frame of reference or values, whereas description represents objective, neutral (as far as possible) reporting.

Focus feedback on descriptions of behavior which are in terms of “more or less” rather than in terms of “either-or.” The “more or less” terminology implies a continuum on which any behavior may fall, stressing quantity, which is objective and measurable, rather than quality, which is subjective and judgmental. Thus, participation of a person may fall on a continuum from low participation to high participation, rather than “good” or “bad” participation. Not to think in terms of “more or less” and the use of continua is to trap ourselves into thinking in categories, which may then represent serious distortions of reality.

Focus feedback on behavior related to a specific situation, preferably to the “here and now” rather than to behavior in the abstract which places it in the “there and then.” What you and I do is always tied in some way to time and place, and we increase our understanding of behavior by keeping it tied to time and place. Feedback is generally more meaningful if given as soon as appropriate after the observation or reactions occur, thus keeping it concrete and relatively free of distortions that come from the lapse of time.

Focus feedback on the sharing of ideas and information rather than on giving advice. By sharing ideas and information, we leave the individual free to make decisions – based upon personal goals – as to how to use the ideas and information in a particular situation at a particular time. When we give advice, we take away the individual’s freedom to choose the most appropriate course of action.

Focus feedback on exploration of alternatives rather than answers or solutions. The more we can focus on a variety of procedures and means for the attainment of a particular goal, the less likely we are to accept prematurely a particular answer or solution – which may or may not fit our particular problem.

Focus feedback on the value it may provide for the recipient, rather than the value or “release” it provides the person giving the feedback. The feedback provided should serve the needs of the recipient rather than the needs of the giver. Help and feedback need to be given and heard as an offer, not an imposition.

Focus feedback on the amount of information that the person receiving it can use, rather than on the amount that you have which you might like to give. The person who receives too much feedback may be unable to react effectively. When we give more than can be used, we may be satisfying our own needs rather than helping the other person.

Focus feedback on time and place so that personal data can be shared at appropriate times. Because the reception and use of personal feedback involves many possible emotional reactions, it is important to be sensitive to when it is appropriate to provide feedback. Excellent feedback presented at an inappropriate time may do more harm than good.

Focus feedback on what is said rather than why it is said. The aspects of feedback which related to the what, how, when, where of what is said are observable characteristics. The why of what is said takes us from the observable to the inferred, and brings up questions of “motive” or “intent” unless the why explicitly refers to goals. To make assumptions about the motives of the person giving feedback may prevent us from hearing, or cause us to distort what is said. In short, if I question “why” a person gives me feedback, I may not hear what is being said.

In short, the giving (and receiving) of feedback requires courage, skill, understanding, and respect for self and others.

*Dr. George Lehner passed away in February 2007. George was a good friend and tremendous mentor. He provide simple and clear lessons that everyone he touched valued. This paper was published by George many years ago. We find its lessons very important and still relevant. So many of the problems leaders, managers, team mates create is by providing ineffective feedback which reduces trust and adversely impacts relationships.