

Guide to Giving and Receiving Feedback

Tripod, Nov 2023

What is feedback (for)

'Feedback' is a communication to a person or a group which gives that person/group information about **how they affect others** or information about their **perspective** on something that person/group has done. By definition, this is information we can't have unless someone else tells us. When members of a group regularly give each other feedback, it helps to develop skills and be accountable to each other. Feedback helps an individual consider and change their **behaviour**, and work in better alignment with the purpose and values of your group.

Useful feedback can provide **vital information and opportunities**: learning, better teamwork, stronger relationships, healthier group dynamics or simply insight and understanding.

It is important to be able to give feedback in such a way that people can hear it, take it in, evaluate it, and change behaviour which affects their relationship with others.

Before giving feedback

It can be useful to:

Build self-awareness: We all have personal and cultural habits for how we approach feedback. For example, maybe we don't raise issues at all, or we automatically reject feedback people give us. By becoming more aware of our habits, we can reflect on how they affect different situations. This may enable us to make different choices if we want to.

Recognise strong feelings: Communicating can be much harder when you have very strong feelings on the topic. It may be easier to listen to other people and express yourself clearly if you give your feelings attention separately from the feedback conversation, for example by seeking support from a friend or your peer supervisor first.

Disclaimer: this is not saying that being calm and non-emotional should be a condition for being heard. This attitude is called 'tone policing', and can be extremely disempowering if someone needs to raise something they are distressed or angry about.

Often confusions around feedback stem from a blending of two different motivations for letting others know of the effect of their actions. Becoming proficient in offering feedback takes us through **learning to distinguish between feedback and personal trigger**.

Providing feedback is usually motivated by a desire to contribute to the learning of another person and to the functioning of the whole. Sharing a personal trigger is usually motivated by a desire to be heard, understood, or attended to. When we mix the two, we are likely to create confusion.

Especially when you're upset or angry, it's easy to focus more on other people, e.g. blaming them for the situation, worrying how they'll respond to what you say etc. You can often be more true to what you really want to say and communicate more clearly if you start by focusing on yourself. It is particularly helpful to work out if strong reactions you are having may be partly caused by something outside the situation, e.g. the mood you're in, or similar things happening in the past. These reactions are still important and valid, but may not be the responsibility of the person you are raising the issue with.

So when giving feedback, get clear about what you are trying to achieve. For example, do you need to off-load some feelings in order to prevent resentment from building? Or you're concerned that someone is feeling under-valued, and you want to counter-balance that by appreciating what they do?

A final thing to take into account is: **are you well-placed to give the feedback?** If raising the issue will have a big emotional cost for you, could you ask someone else to raise it on your behalf? This is especially relevant if you've been harmed by the other person, or you want to point out an oppressive behaviour that affects you.

You can always ask someone else to support you in giving feedback.

Giving feedback

We emphasise being both **honest** and **respectful**, offering your perspective but also trying to **understand** other people's, being **empathic**. It is important to **recognise different perspectives**: we can only really see the world through our own eyes, and it can be hard to accept that other people see things very differently. However, if someone does something that doesn't work for us, it's not necessarily because they've done something 'wrong'.

Below are some criteria for useful feedback:

Consent: Check in with the person(s) whether they're open to receiving verbal feedback at that moment. If not, arrange another time for a chat and/or offer the feedback in another format, e.g. in written form or in a voice message.

Giving a heads-up: If you've arranged a specific time for a feedback conversation, it can be helpful to give a sense of what the feedback may be about beforehand, so that the other person can mentally and emotionally prepare.

Timing: It is usually good to raise issues relatively soon after something happened. Praise is most relevant when we can remember what it was for! And bad feelings can escalate if they go unspoken. A general guideline would be to give yourself enough time to reflect and get in the right frame of mind, but not too much more. (Depending of course, on the person's readiness to hear it, and on the support available from others if the receiver is acutely vulnerable, etc.).

Useful feedback is **descriptive** rather than evaluative. It merely describes what is seen or heard, thus the receiver is left free to use it or not. By avoiding evaluative or judgmental language, it reduces the need for the receiver to respond defensively. Using **observational language** can help shift our consciousness away from judgments and triggers, and to make room for the possibility of different ways of understanding the behaviour.

Observational language includes:

1. Name **specific behaviours** someone's done
2. Tell them the **impact** of those behaviours.

These are the first stages of this simple and very useful model for nonviolent feedback:

Observing – “I’ve noticed that...”

Feeling – “What I’m feeling is...” or **Impact** – “How this affected me was...”

Needs / Values – “What I need or value is...”

Request – “I’d like to ask that...”

Adapted from Marshall Rosenberg.

Specific behaviours

Try to speak as much as you can from your own experience, and be as specific as possible. “You weren’t listening”, is not as helpful as “Just when Sam started talking about his mother, your eyes looked elsewhere and it looked as though you were not listening to what he was saying”.

Being specific can also be helpful with positive feedback. If you tell someone “You’re great”, they may simply hear that you want to be nice to them! If you give more information you demonstrate you’ve really paid attention to what they’ve done: “The campaign leaflets you made brought everyone’s ideas together and put across our politics powerfully.” It could also be relevant to add whether this behaviour happened only once or if you’re noticing a pattern.

Feelings / Impact(s)

What is the effect of the behaviour or words on you, how does it make you feel? You may think the impacts are obvious - but often our responses are more personal than we acknowledge. The impact could be practical (what happened or might happen as a result of the behaviour?), emotional (“when you do X, I feel...”) or related to how we interpret a certain behaviour or expression. Our interpretation may have nothing to do with someone’s intention, or the reason they did something. However, beliefs and interpretations are a big part of our experience so bringing them into the open can help clear things up. Try acknowledging your interpretations for what they are, e.g. “Where I jump to in my head when you say that is...”, “I know you may see this differently, but to me that sounds like...”

When sharing observations and impact, you may want to think how you might be misunderstanding or not seeing the whole picture. Think of a question that will help you learn more about where the other person is coming from. Example: “When you didn’t respond to any of my suggestions in the meeting, I felt frustrated. I could use some clarity about what you were thinking when you did that. Would you be willing to share that with me?”

Needs & Values

As the giver, it is important to explain **why** what you are saying **matters**. It is important for people to understand why something matters to the person speaking, either because it is important to her or him personally, or because of what’s at stake for the collective as a whole. You may want to refer to your group’s values and/or safer spaces agreement. Moreover, for the person providing the feedback, **naming the values and needs that lie underneath** our evaluations (and even judgments) tends to bring relief and clarity, and supports us in having feedback that’s less charged and therefore easier to hear.

Feedback needs to take into account the **needs of both the receiver and the giver** of feedback. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only the giver’s needs and fails to consider the needs of the receiver.

Request(s)

Think of something that is important to you in that you would like to ask for, to bring repair and build trust. Requests, if accepted and adopted, can lead to new or renewed/revised agreements. When asking someone to change a behaviour, check whether it is **directed toward behaviour that the receiver can change**. Frustration is only increased when one is reminded of a shortcoming over which they have little control. It can help to come with **concrete suggestions** of how the requested change could look like, in order to move towards (shared!) desired goals and outcomes.

Other pointers

Check in with the receiver. When people receive feedback they are likely to be anxious and consequently they may hear a different message than what was intended. It is therefore important to check that the person has correctly heard the feedback. Invite and listen to their response to what you said and try reflecting back what you heard and check for accuracy. It can be helpful to take turns responding and reflecting back, to make sure you really hear each other.

Stay open to dialogue. Feedback might still generate defensiveness or resistance if we are completely set on the outcome we want, without regard for what the other person might want. The more we are able to show understanding for the experiences of others and the choices that others make, including the understanding of what might have led them to take the actions we found challenging, the more of a sense of partnership others can experience. **Focus on creating a solution together, taking into account all parties' well-being.**

Remember the positives: Frequent appreciation and recognition of what people do well improves morale, relationships and helps people build their skills. Praise can be offered alongside critical feedback. However, people may not really hear positives when they are offered alongside negatives. Regularly noticing and telling people what you like about them may have a better impact.

Receiving feedback

Asking for feedback

Often the best way to get someone else's input on what we are doing is to directly ask them for feedback. This could be because we want to learn a new skill, because we suspect they have concerns they're not voicing, or just to make space for open communication.

Some questions to consider:

Do you really want feedback? Sometimes, we ask someone's opinion, but what we really want is reassurance! In this situation, we can get annoyed or defensive if what we get back feels too critical. If you want someone to tell you that you're doing OK, could you ask them for that? If you want balanced feedback, but find criticism difficult, is there a way to make it easier for yourself?

What do you really want out of the feedback? Being clear about this can make what you get back much more useful. For example, do you have a particular concern, e.g.: "I'm trying to work on letting go and micro-managing less when I work with people. What's your experience of me in relation to that?" Or is there particular information that will be useful to you, e.g. "I don't want to change the messages of the blog post, I just want feedback on whether it comes across clearly."

Will giving feedback be a lot of work? Can you make the job easier for the people giving feedback? For example, by letting them say how and when the feedback should happen, or asking them **focused questions** to help make it a smaller job.

Are you really open to changing? Be realistic about how much notice you intend to take of the feedback. For example, if you show someone a website design you think is finished, you might react badly if they suggest major changes. Can you be clear with them, e.g. "I'm hoping not to spend too much more time on this, so can you stick to changes that seem really important, or quick tweaks."

While receiving the feedback in person

To make use of feedback it is important to accurately hear it, and to acknowledge that you've heard it to the person giving the feedback.

If you're receiving written feedback or indirect feedback via for example your peer supervisor, make sure you thank the person who gave the feedback and share an appropriate and timely response,

If you receive the feedback in person, the following pointers may be useful:

- If you notice you don't have the capacity to receive feedback well in that particular moment or format, ask the person to give it at another time and/or in another form.
- Stay calm, receptive and listen attentively. Use your active listening skills. Focus on understanding where someone is coming from. Let them speak until they've finished, if you can.
- Try looking out for the things they've said which you agree with, rather than focusing on the things you don't.
- Thank them, if you can be sincere. Raising an issue often takes courage and effort, and it helps to acknowledge that.
- Summarise to check your understanding. Try to make a clear distinction between what they've actually said ("If I've understood you right, I think you're saying...") and the interpretations you're making ("I realise you've not said this in so many words, but what I'm hearing is..."). Reflecting back what you heard, in both the feelings and content, is also a way to show that you've listened.
- Ask for clarification where needed. Ask questions to clarify (not to interrogate or pick apart what they're saying). Try helping them to get more specific about your actual behaviour.

Throughout the conversation, **notice how you are feeling**. By noticing your feelings, you have more choices about how to respond. For example, some people respond to praise by getting embarrassed or immediately dismiss it as insincere. Noticing you're doing that may help you pause, and try to hear it instead.

It is particularly important to recognise when you are feeling defensive because this makes it harder to really hear what's being said. **Defensive behaviours** to look out for include:

- interrupting
- saying 'yes, but ...'
- shifting attention away from the content of the other person's message (e.g. focusing on how they said it, telling them you're having a difficult time, or that they've also behaved in ways you don't like).

Looking after yourself

If you want to listen but you're finding it hard, try reminding yourself that the feedback they are offering is just their perspective. You don't have to share their views, just focus on trying to understand them. In most cases, it's OK to ask for a bit of space before continuing the conversation. Usually the conversation will go best for both people if you have the chance to get yourself in a mood where you can actually listen.

Offer your perspective if appropriate

Sometimes it can be too soon, or not helpful at all, to give your perspective. For example, if someone is really hurt and has gone to the effort of raising something, anything you say might sound like making excuses. However, if you do think it will be helpful for your relationship, your group or in order to resolve the issue, you might explain your behaviour, or why you think it is justified, or tell them that you have a different memory of the event they described.

Looking for a way forward

The process for finding a way forward will depend a lot on whether the issue has a roughly equal impact on both of you. If one person or group has a lot more at stake than others, the fairest arrangement might simply be for them to decide what happens next. Sometimes this is a case of setting a simple boundary: "I have to pick my kids up from school, so I can't do shifts after 3pm." or "Call me 'she', not 'he'." When the issue has a significant impact on everyone involved, there will need to be a more complicated negotiation to work out what is fair. Here are some basic tips to come up with solutions/agreements that work for everyone:

Getting back to needs

Sometimes we can get stuck because the things we want seem to be incompatible. One person might like to do things well in advance while another person prefers to do things last minute. Try to work out the underlying needs you are each trying to meet, for example feeling motivated, or feeling confident you'll complete the task on time.

Try coming up with new ideas

Look for ways that everyone can meet their core needs. Sometimes those solutions are obvious - e.g. if one person needs background music to concentrate, and the other person silence, could you get a pair of good quality headphones? Sometimes the situation is more complex, and you may need to come up with an imperfect solution and just give it a try. Even if we make a request of someone to change specific behaviours, we can consider how, individually or organisationally, we can best support the person to make these changes easier.

Review

It is often useful to plan a review meeting a few weeks (or months) down the line so no-one has to do the work of raising the issue from scratch. This could be to test the impacts of the solutions you came up with, or it can be a good way of staying on track if you've committed to changing your behaviour.

Sources

We've gratefully adapted this guide from [this version](#) compiled by the Gastivists collective, which in turn was based on the following resources:

[Asking, giving and receiving, looking for a way forward](#) (Seeds for Change)

[Feedback without criticism](#) (Bay NVC)

[Giving and receiving feedback](#) (The Commons - Social Change Library)

Other resources:

A short [video](#) by Paul Kahawatte from Navigate.