



Feedback and its Essentials

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Explain why feedback is essential
- ✓ Apply a framework for providing formal or informal feedback
- ✓ Use descriptive language in delivering feedback

Feedback and Its Essentials

Definitions

Food for Thought

When it comes to providing feedback, there are a few things to tell ourselves. First of all, feedback is a commentary on how you think someone is doing, and as such that feedback can include positive or negative observations, or both. Feedback that is heard and acted upon is what we would consider **effective feedback**. This sort of feedback is provided in a constructive manner.

Providing **constructive feedback** means that you are focused on providing feedback in a helpful manner, to help the other individual to learn and grow, not to insult, belittle, or punish them. (Sometimes actions do require some kind of negative consequence, too, but that is separate from this process.) Our objective in this course is to help you provide constructive feedback.

Our experience has shown us that some people do not like getting feedback at all. They may have had bad experiences with performance reviews or harshly judgmental parents or coaches growing up. Or, perhaps they are modest and not accustomed to receiving praise or speaking about themselves in front of others. Keep these potential anxieties in mind as you prepare to deliver feedback.

As well, feedback is supposed to be delivered honestly, but some of us are not very good about being honest. On the one hand, many workplace supervisors are concerned with being perceived as “fair and friendly.” Instead of being honest, they avoid delivering the truth in case the employee dislikes them for it.

On the other hand, we can be so honest with people that we are hurtful instead of being constructive. Another question to ask yourself is: can our desire to be honest release too much information and be hurtful instead of constructive?

When Feedback is Needed

Some people want – and need – feedback more frequently than others. It’s up to you to gauge what is appropriate and what you can offer constructively and effectively. Most people get far less feedback than they want. If you change your habits to deliver more feedback more frequently, that’s great! We see feedback as a positive event, and we will teach you how to make it that way.

When it comes to formal performance review time (which is typically annually or semi-annually), people expect to get feedback from you. However, it is our position that there should never be any surprises in

the formal review. Your people should already know how they are doing and what they need to be working on because of the informal feedback that you provide. In addition, they should never be told that they've been doing something incorrectly for six months and you have decided to withhold the information from them until the formal review is completed. Doing so creates bad feelings and can erode trust with your team.

Scenario One

Sue, one of your direct reports, asks you if the business case they wrote last week is suitable for forwarding to the board.

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Two

Sam, also one of your direct reports, asks if you received the e-mail that they sent you two minutes ago, and whether or not you are going to respond. They check up e-mails that they have sent in this manner all the time.

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Three

Your photocopy repair technician completes a tune-up on your copier, but after he leaves you notice that there is a faint grey line printing on the margin of each copy that comes off the machine.

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Four

Your best friend has broccoli stuck in their teeth.

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Five

Your business partner regularly mispronounces spaghetti as “bisghetti.”

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Six

Your pre-teen child aspires to be a famous musician but their attempts at learning their instrument are making you crazy. Would you tell them about how they sound, or take them for lessons so that they can get better quickly?

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Seven

Your elderly grandmother remembers your favorite childhood dish as Spaghetti Bolognese and spends six hours creating the best sauce ever. When you sit down to dinner will you remind her that you have been a vegetarian for the last year?

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Speaking Clearly

Being Descriptive

When providing feedback, you want to make sure that people are hearing what it is that you are saying, so you need to make sure that the language that you use is descriptive and clear.

Use the space below to record some words that you would find helpful and unhelpful during feedback.

Helpful Words	Unhelpful Words

Staying Neutral

Words and body language are our only real tools when it comes to delivering feedback (although you will probably do formal performance reviews in writing too), and it is extremely important to manage what you are saying with your mouth and through your posture, gestures, and facial expressions.

Keep in mind that your goal is to provide constructive criticism that is heard and acted upon. This means that it's essential that you keep your words and body language consistent.

Communication Strategies

Basic Skills

If you are going to improve your feedback skills, you also need to work on your ability to ask thoughtful questions; questions that give us more information about the individual you are speaking with (whether it is an employee, colleague, or a supplier) and their work, thoughts, and feelings. To be successful in hosting a feedback meeting or interview, the interviewer must have knowledge and skills in both being an effective listener and in asking the right questions in order to be effective.

As leaders, we should be spending a lot of our time asking questions and providing answers. When it comes to asking, however, we often aren't aware of our technique. Open questions in particular often give us difficulty, which is unfortunate since they are the most important ones for us to become skilled at using. If you are having trouble with open questions, it can be helpful to get more comfortable with small talk and easing yourself into the conversation at hand.

Questioning Skills

The right questions provide structure to your feedback session. Here are some general guidelines:

- Ask one question at a time, instead of trying to get to everything at once.
- Phrase the question in simple, easily understandable words and terms that don't intimidate your conversation partner.
- Keep your questions brief. Questions that are more than two sentences in length are too long; break them up and ask them as two or more questions.
- Keep your phrasing positive. Reframe negative questions to make them more positive, which will encourage conversation.
- Use open questions to get more information, rather than relying on closed questions.
- Follow up on incomplete answers by probing for more information.

You can plan for the conversation ahead of time and decide what kind of questions to ask depending on what your goals are. Design your questions to help you with any of the following:

- Get information
- Gain consensus
- Focus conversations

- Begin closing the conversation
- Gather opinions

It is helpful to have some good questions ready that relate to the feedback conversation. List some ideas below.

To improve your communication skills, consider the following types of questions.

Good Questions

Open Ended Questions

These are broad, general questions that require your conversation partner to provide more than just a “yes” or “no” answer. They also permit the other person to decide how much information to give.

Open questions can do the following:

- Give us more information
- Encourage your conversation partner to speak openly
- Encourage people to share opinions and ideas
- Help us determine if people have interpreted what we say accurately

The following are examples of open ended questions that can be used in a formal feedback or performance evaluation meeting:

- “In your own words, evaluate your accomplishments this quarter.”
- “Tell me about your complaint.”
- “Tell me how I can help you achieve your goals.”
- “What do I have to give you to get what I want?”
- “Describe how you think the project developed.”

Hypothetical Open Questions

These questions allow the partner in your conversation some flexibility and choice in deciding how to respond to an invented but possible situation. Since they are hypothetical, they give you, as interviewer or leader of the conversation, greater flexibility in designing a question to fit a particular situation. Here are some examples:

- “Let’s change roles for a moment. Suppose you were supervisor of this department and someone came to you with a complaint similar to yours. How would you like to handle it?”
- “If you learned a process or procedure that that could free up one hour of your time each week, what do you see yourself doing during that hour?”

Direct or Specific Questions

These are short questions requiring at least a short answer and may include a yes or no answer. They are valuable because they require limited answers, which can make it easier for some of your employees than trying to deal with a large number of open-ended questions. Here are some examples of direct questions:

- “Is the accusation against you accurate?”
- “Did you accomplish your top priority this year?”
- “Do you think you should receive a promotion?”

Closed Questions

Closed questions can be answered with a single word or two, such as a simple yes or no. They can begin the closing process in a conversation, or provide confirmation of a detail, but they don’t usually lead to a richer conversation or gathering more information. The advantage of closed questions is that they give you control over the questions and the type of answers you receive. Closed questions are easy to interpret and more questions can be answered in less time.

However, closed questions don’t allow for detailed explanations or for the other person to share how they feel about a particular circumstance. If you wish to encourage a richer response or to encourage a frustrated person to talk freely, then you need to avoid asking closed questions. Here are some examples of closed questions:

- “Does this make you angry?”
- “Do you think this appraisal is fair?”

To open up those same questions, you could try these open-ended statements:

- “Please explain how you feel about this situation.”
- “Tell me how you feel about this appraisal.”

Third-Person Questions

Embarrassing or personal questions may be phrased in a less threatening way by involving a third person. For example, instead of asking “Do you think the raise is fair?” the supervisor can ask, “Do the employees in our department think the raise is fair?”

You have to listen carefully to the answer to determine whether they reply using their own personal opinion (as is often the case, and is really what you are after.) You may need to ask some additional questions to more fully flesh out the information you are looking for.

Poor Questions

Here are some question types that you should be cautious of using.

Loaded Questions

These are questions that have no correct answer, and they usually elicit an emotional response. Loaded questions are not usually used by skilled interviewers because they can easily throw the conversation off track. They may even backfire on you. Some examples include:

- “Have you stopped drinking yet?”
- “Are you still difficult to get along with?”

Leading Questions

A leading question tells your conversation partner what you really want to hear in their answer. All that you learn by asking these questions is that the employee has figured out how to give you the answer that you want; the “correct” answer. Examples include:

- “I don’t think you’ve been working up to your potential. What do you think?”
- “You don’t mind helping Annie with her assignment, do you?”

Probing

When we do not get enough information by using open-ended questions, we can use probes to expand the conversation.

Verbal and Nonverbal Probes

A probe will encourage your conversation partner to add to their previous response. Verbal probes are often a single word or short phrase. Some examples are:

- “Tell me more about that.”
- “That’s interesting. Tell me more.”
- “Really?”
- “Why?”
- “Can you give me a specific example of what you mean?”

Nonverbal probes rely on your body language and gestures to get the same results as a verbal probe. Some examples are:

- Raising the eyebrows as if you are surprised
- Nodding
- Frowning
- Pursing the lips

Probing Techniques

There are many ways that you can use probing in your conversations. We’ve provided some techniques for you below.

1. Ask an **open question**, such as:
 - “Can you describe that more clearly?”
 - “Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?”
 - “What do you think we should do?”

You’ll soon recognize that if you ask too many of these questions, your conversation partner will feel like they are under interrogation, so use them carefully.

2. **Pause.** Many of us feel uncomfortable when silence overtakes a conversation, and we will fill the silence by expanding on what was said previously.
3. **Use reflective or mirroring questions.** For example, if the employee says “I just don’t feel challenged by my work anymore,” you may respond by just reflecting back to them, “Challenged?” Then pause. Usually, the other person will provide you with an expanded answer without you asking more questions or interrogating. These kinds of statements also serve to focus or clarify and summarize without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They demonstrate your intent to understand the speaker’s thoughts and feelings.
4. **Paraphrase** what has just been said in your own words. “So if I understand you correctly, you...” Using this technique shows that you want to understand your conversation partner and that you

want to be accurate. It also allows the sender to hear back what they have said from someone else's point of view.

5. **Summary questions** are a helpful way of probing and winding up the conversation at the same time. "You have spoken to your colleague about his foul language in the office, you have tried to ignore it, and you remain concerned about the impact his swearing has on our visitors and staff. None of these techniques have worked to reduce the amount of swearing and now you are asking me to intervene. Have I got it right?"

Here is another example: when we asked an employee why it would take until next week to finish the project, one of her reasons was lack of cooperation from the production department.

Rather than come back with yet another question, you might just say "Cooperation..." in a reflective tone of voice, and pause again. Usually, the other person will recognize that reflection as a clue to expand or provide you with additional information.

Summary statements or paraphrases sum up what has been said, and will show that you have listened and absorbed what's being said. Don't use them to take over the dialogue.

The summary is the stronger cue that the conversation is winding down on that topic. However, if necessary or appropriate, you can follow this up with a fact-finding question (usually a closed question), such as, "Did you want to say more about the issue?", or, "Do you have any other suggestions?"

Non-Verbal Messages

Non-verbal messages can be far more important than the words we say. The way we stand, what we do with our hands, the sound of our voice, the way we walk, and the expressions on our face can support, enhance, and even contradict what we say.

In our fast-paced world, we don't have time to get more than a quick snapshot of how a person looks before we make up our mind about them. They are making up their mind about us at the same time, so it is essential that our non-verbal messages are consistent with what we say verbally.

Remember that one important aspect of providing feedback is to encourage employees to learn and grow. If, for example, an employee gets a low rating on some aspect of a performance appraisal, and you as the supervisor notices the employee's flushed face or tight lips, but you do not make any observation about it (and the employee asks for no explanation), you are not likely to stimulate improvement. In an even worse case, you could see even less performance.

When we meet, what should we be watching for from our employees?

- Rejection of our comments (for example, the person physically moves further from us by sitting back in their chair or slouching in their seat)
- Anger on the face and in their posture
- Lack of understanding or comprehension (such as furrowed brows, pursed lips)

What are some other non-verbal signals we must be careful not to communicate to employees?

- Boredom (if you look like you're just going through the motions of yet another performance review, they will see it)
- Anger (our own flushed face, or the way we put things on our desk will all convey our own mood)
- Arrogance

The face and the eyes are the most expressive means of non-verbal communication. Additional positive or negative messages are sent by your gestures, posture, and the space between you and the other person.

Positive body language is important to encourage conversation and support your positive intent in meeting with the other person. When we don't pay attention to our non-verbal signals, we often send mixed or confusing messages to people. Get control of your image by working on your non-verbal language.

Managing Your Messages**What are some things that we need to consider about the following aspects of our body language?****Facial Expression**

Smiling

Eye Contact

Body Language

Voice

Your attitude is projected through your voice as well as your body language. Make sure your body language and voice always says, "I'm here to help as best I can."

When your voice is annoyed, impatient, or condescending, the other person may become angered or angrier. Speak with a calm, firm, caring, soothing tone. Your communications will be more relaxed, more pleasant, and better understood.

The speed and rhythm of your speech is important as well. Clear communication includes appropriate pauses and inflections to support the words.

Qualities of a Good Voice

- Awake and interested
- A smile in your voice
- Straightforward language, without jargon
- Glad the person called or visited
- Easy to understand with moderate volume and rate
- Well-modulated, varied tone

Interpretation Exercise

Look at the images below. Determine what you think is happening in each of the illustrations and how you feel about it.

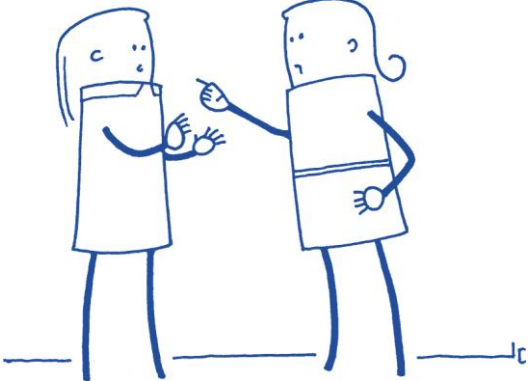
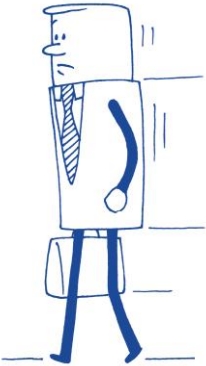
Image	What I Think is Happening	How I Feel About It
		
		
		

Image	What I Think is Happening	How I Feel About It
		
		

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Blanchard, Kenneth, Jim Ballard, Thad Lacinak, and Chuck Tompkins. Whale Done! Free Press, 2002.*
- ✓ *Boothman, Nicholas. How to Make People Like You in 90 Seconds or Less. Workman Publishing Company, 2000.*
- ✓ *Coonradt, Charles. The Game of Work. Gibbs Smith, 2007.*
- ✓ *Daniels, Aubrey C. Bringing Out the Best in People. McGraw-Hill, 2000.*
- ✓ *Elton, Chester, and Adrian Gostick. The 24-Carrot Manager. Gibbs Smith, 2002*