

Mastering the Art of Feedback: Cultivating Positive and Productive Conversations

Many people find feedback difficult, whether they're giving or receiving it. There are ways to make it easier for everyone

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THE TERM “CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK” technically refers to both positive feedback (what the employee is doing well) and negative feedback (what needs improvement). In reality, when people hear “I’d like to give you some constructive feedback,” they’re pretty confident that the next words will focus on how they need to improve, not on how fabulously they performed. In practice, “constructive feedback” is frequently negative

feedback. Recent surveys reflect this perspective. A Gallup survey found that 95 percent of managers are dissatisfied with their feedback process, and less than 20 percent of employees found feedback conversations motivating.¹ Teams want more and better feedback. Although more than half of managers give feedback a few times a year or less, 96 percent of employees want feedback much more frequently.² Younger workers, millennials, and Gen Z prefer it weekly.³

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People also want better feedback. According to Gallup, nearly 70 percent of managers believe they’re good at giving feedback, while only 50 percent of employees agree. Specifically, managers

failed to give frequent feedback, positive feedback, and good-quality feedback.⁴

Part of the problem is that traditional feedback methods ignore the way human brains work. The standard “compliment sandwich” delivers a critique between two compliments.⁵ The intent is to offer one negative and two positives. Unfortunately, that’s not how it’s received. Since people are hardwired to focus on negative input, the compliments are drowned out by the critique. If the compliments are heard at all, they’re likely to be interpreted as insincere or insignificant. Although the leader believes the feedback has been more positive than negative, the employee perceives the feedback as primarily negative.

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Serving a compliment sandwich is only slightly less dreadful than receiving one. As a result, many leaders and employees avoid feedback conversations. But there is a way out of this uncomfortable and unproductive cycle. Instead of “giving feedback,” engage in frequent conversations that are helpful, honest, and humble.

Embrace a Helpful Mindset

The first step in delivering effective feedback is to focus on being helpful. People are highly attuned to emotions, tone, and intent. They can easily detect when someone is insincere, frustrated, condescending, or apathetic. A genuine desire to help is essential. Frankly, this may be the hardest step. The intensity of daily work easily leads to frustration with team imperfections. This is entirely normal. Likely your team feels the same frustration. Work-

ing together well is hard, and leading well is even harder. Set your heart and mind on wishing the best for the employee, the team, and the firm. Coming with a heart and mind focused on helping will make it much easier to have a productive conversation. It will also help you with the next feedback essential: compassionate honesty.

Lead with Compassionate Honesty

Unfortunately, the emotional awkwardness of delivering unpleasant feedback drives many people to be too vague. As a coach, I’ve participated in developmental meetings where the feedback was baffling. Employees were asked to “be a team player,” “communicate better,” or “collaborate more” without clarity on how to improve. Feeling confused myself, I diplomatically probed for a fuller picture. In the end, the employees had a clear idea of how to meet expectations, and they appreciated the honesty. One employee told me after a feedback session, “Barbara, past feedback was so frustrating. I never got clear direction on how to improve. Now, I know what I need to work on.” When I coach individuals who have been given compassionate honest and clear feedback, it increases their motivation. They want to succeed and know how to do it. They’re happier with their leaders, happier with their job, and more successful. In addition to helpful honesty, good feedback conversations include a healthy dose of humility.

Model Collaborative Humility

The humble approach recognizes that the leader’s viewpoint lacks crucial information. The employee has blind spots, but so does the leader. The feedback conversation needs to uncover the blind spots on both sides. When a leader approaches an employee seeking to learn, it lowers defenses and opens the door to problem-solving. That’s not to say that every

employee will immediately embrace the feedback. Receiving feedback well is just as hard as giving it. But, approaching the conversation with humility will make it easier for team members to collaborate with you, rather than defend against you. In addition to adopting a helpful, honest, and humble approach, four practical strategies help make feedback conversations productively actionable.

Four Practical Feedback Strategies

Be focused and prompt. To avoid the dreaded compliment sandwich, focus on one main message. Let your praise be just praise, at every opportunity. Since it takes five positive messages to overcome the impact of one negative, offer as much encouragement as possible. When a team member needs mentoring or correction, don't wait. Based on the psychology of learning and habit formation, people need repeated small inputs to change behavior. It's also easier to hold a positive mindset when you address a concern before it causes even more friction.

Focus on specific behaviors. People need to know exactly how to change before they can adapt. As much as possible, help them change specific behaviors. I recently talked with a leader who needed to offer sensitive feedback to a new associate. He did it brilliantly. The new employee was sharing personal stories loudly in an open workspace. At the next opportunity to observe the behavior, he diplomatically shared the impact of the behavior on clients and staff. He then asked the associate to lower his voice and to keep personal conversations to private spaces. His feedback focused on an immediate observation and requested two specific behaviors that solved the concern. The new associate immediately agreed and apologized for disrupting the clients and staff.

Observe patterns. Several coaching clients struggle to engage their team in productive feedback conversations. Even when they're doing their best to be helpful, compassionately honest, and humble, it does not go well. One leader shared: "Barbara, every time I share instructive feedback, she disagrees and defends. It's so frustrating." Neuropsychologically, these folks are operating in the fight or flight mode. They physiologically cannot collaborate when feeling defensive. One way to address this is to discuss the pattern when you and the employee are calm. For example, you might say

I'd like to discuss a concern. I've noticed that when I try to help you by offering feedback, you tend to disagree. We seem to go back and forth disagreeing on the feedback, rather than focusing on the next steps. I feel stuck and don't know how to share observations that are intended to help you. Can you help me?

Asking for help when the employee is not emotionally hijacked opens the door to working together on better feedback conversations. Whenever possible, share positive patterns as well. Acknowledging improvement is hugely powerful. The more people are encouraged positively, the more willing they will be to engage in future feedback conversations.

Explain impact and significance. Helpful feedback gives enough context for the individual to understand future significance. One of my coaching clients is helping a client service professional to reach their highest potential. He has clearly outlined the available promotion opportunities and emphasized that she is a valuable employee, even if she chooses to stay in her current role. He's also clarified the new skills needed to be promoted. He's giving her small projects to develop new skills and identifying

the projects as development training. This has been helpful to them both. New projects aren't just a load of more work; they have a specific significance. She's alerted to pay attention and stretch her capacity for a reason. In another example, a developing junior adviser was focused on urgencies that produced immediate wins, while ignoring activities that would deliver more long-term value. The leader crafted feedback that helped her see why other activities were more important to her long-term success. The associate adviser needed the wisdom of the veteran adviser to prioritize effectively. Sharing the larger context helps team members pay attention to the right things, at the right time, for the right reasons.

We tend to focus on feedback for improvement because it's the hardest to give. That is not to ignore the importance of positive feedback. Ideally, team members will receive frequent positive feedback that is also timely and specific. The best feedback is woven into continuous conversations that help team members feel encouraged, guided, and developed. If you'd like to explore more, please reach out to discuss your specific leadership concerns. ■

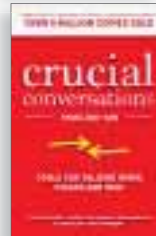
Endnotes

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2. Blagojević, Ivan. n.d. "Performance Management Statistics." 99firms. <https://99firms.com/blog/performance-management-statistics/>.
3. Morgan, Avery. 2024, July 22. "Why Gen Z and Millennial Workers Receive Feedback Differently." *Fast Company*. www.fastcompany.com/91159477/why-gen-z-and-millennial-workers-receive-feedback-differently.
4. Wigert, Ben. 2024, July 15. "The Strengths, Weaknesses and Blind Spots of Managers." *Gallup*. [www.gallup.com/workplace/645299/strengths-](http://www.gallup.com/workplace/645299/strengths-weaknesses-blind-spots-managers.aspx)

Recommended Reading



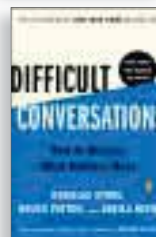
- **Radical Candor**
Kim Scott, St. Martin's Press



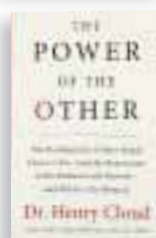
- **Crucial Conversations**,
Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, McGraw-Hill



- **Thanks for the Feedback**
Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen, Viking



- **Difficult Conversations**
Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen, Penguin Books



- **The Power of the Other**
Dr. Henry Cloud, Harper Business

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5. Grant, Adam. 2024, January 17. "Stop Serving the Compliment Sandwich." *Granted*. <https://adamgrant.substack.com/p/stop-serving-the-compliment-sandwich>.