

# Here's How to... Give Constructive Feedback at Work

By Brooks C. Mendell

**W**e all need feedback to improve. Managers who do not provide feedback to employees and colleagues at work produce two unwanted consequences: (1) They fail to reinforce desired performance, and (2) they enable unwanted behaviors.

If a member of your team does something well or poorly, whether it is a timber cruise or wildlife survey or project analysis, let him or her know, and be specific. People want to know!

So, if feedback is so important, then why do many managers avoid giving it? Giving feedback can be difficult. Managers don't want to hurt feelings, or they worry about the effectiveness of their feedback and ending up in a worse situation than where they started. Therefore, before giving feedback on anything, managers and employees must agree on what success or failure looks like.

Feedback must be timely. If a manager gives negative feedback on something that's been going on for three years without comment, then who is at fault? Once expectations have been established, feedback should be given regularly, whether good or bad. Feedback provides transparency. It forces managers to clarify where everyone fits into the scheme of things. It shows that they know what is going on and demonstrates that the person and the work are important. Feedback delayed is feedback denied.

## Giving Constructive Criticism

Corrective, constructive criticism is harder to provide than positive, reinforcing feedback. Done poorly, it can be unnecessarily confrontational and emotional. Giving effective, constructive criticism involves three discrete steps.

### Step 1: Provide Feedback in a One-on-One Meetings

Managers should state the purpose of a meeting by saying something such as "I want to give you some feedback on your work." Do not give feedback over lunch; give it during a one-on-one, private session. A feedback session is not a long, rambling monologue; this dilutes its purpose and power. Deliver the message in a single, focused conversation with no small talk. Get to business.

### Step 2: Be Specific

Be specific about what's wrong and how it must improve (relative to expectations or the needs of the



**When done poorly, giving feedback to employees can be unnecessarily confrontational. However, by following three simple rules, managers can learn to give feedback in a constructive and effective way.**

team). Simply identifying what's wrong is not corrective and does not explain why the behavior is problematic. Focus on behaviors, not the person. Constructive criticism should focus on specific actions or behaviors that the person can change or do something about.

Avoid generalizations such as "You are always late," as these are easily countered with one example. Similarly, don't say "You are rude." Instead, say something more specific, such as "When Mr. Jones arrived at our store, you did not greet him or shake his hand." Or, if an employee failed to provide enough details or figures in a project proposal, specify what kind of additional information was needed. Then ask questions to confirm their understanding of the feedback. Focus on the behavior and actions you want changed, not the person.

### Step 3: Reinforce the Relationship

Because the criticism concerned an action or level of performance and not the person, do not rationalize the behavior for the person or analyze the situation. You want a change in behavior, not to conduct a therapy session. A manager should send the message that he or she values the person but not the specific behavior or performance in question. This is part of an ongoing, productive working relationship.

It is kind and honest to let employees know exactly where they stand. Effective feedback requires direct, truthful communication. Sometimes, it can be more direct than people are used to, but the most successful

teams and organizations communicate directly. Over time, such direct communication helps build honest, open relationships between managers and employees.

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