Giving and receiving the gift of feedback, 2018

GIVING AND RECEIVING THE GIFT OF FEEDBACK

“Feedback and respectful confrontation are gifts we share to help one another grow.”

Frederic Laloux
Mention the word “feedback” in a professional setting and you will find many people shaking in their boots or running for the hills. Feedback conversations, whether positive or negative, can be deeply uncomfortable and stressful for both giver and receiver.

The kicker is that people actually crave feedback. Even if it scares them.

Data cited in a recent Forbes article shows that 82% of employees want feedback, regardless of whether the news is “good” or “bad”.

Feedback is incredibly valuable. It enriches our perspective, enabling insight into multiple viewpoints of events and behaviours. It helps us to identify blind spots, reinforce our beliefs with evidence, and grasp patterns of what’s working well and what might be improved in order to focus our attention. Strong cultures of feedback have been shown to correlate with positive employee engagement and stellar business results. Whereas, in the absence of regular and effective feedback, employee’s job satisfaction, commitment and desire to stay all plummet.

In our work with leaders of all levels, we encourage people to see feedback as a gift: one worth receiving and sharing at every opportunity.

As many leaders confess to feeling underprepared for both giving and receiving the gift of feedback, we have prepared a few golden rules to guide you in your gift exchange.
GIVING FEEDBACK

1. Choose your gift: formulate your feedback

When you select a gift, you are choosing more than the gift itself: you are choosing what value or impact you’d like to create in someone’s life and how you want the receiver to feel.

Formulating feedback is the same. Taking the time to give feedback affirms worth — it indicates that you care enough about someone to offer your time and attention to their work or situation. Begin by considering what value you’d like to create for the receiver. This frames your feedback as opportunity-driven and solutions-focused from the get-go, which yields a greater chance of a positive response and resulting behavioural change. You might wish to build the receiver’s confidence and reinforce positive behaviour. Or, perhaps you’d like to provide support, help them see their blind spots and contribute to their ongoing growth and development. Think of a specific goal for the future and begin formulating feedback from there.

If you find yourself stuck in the past, assigning blame, or feeling frustrated, begin with empathy. Put yourself in the receiver’s shoes. Think about what they may have going on in their life and what their motivations may be. This will help you stay constructive.
2. Pick the Occasion: know when to give

Skilful gift giving recognises the importance of timing and context. You would not spring a gift on someone at 4am in morning. Similarly, you might not gift a pair of socks at a wedding. Feedback is also about timing and context.

Positive feedback may be celebrated as a team, and can even boost team cohesion and morale, yet feedback of a more sensitive nature should be shared privately, and only if the timing is right. Research tells us that feedback should be given as close to the witnessed behaviour as possible. However, as the first step of Performance Frontiers’ PARES™ peer feedback model, we encourage people to always ask permission to give. This helps create a space of trust and avoids a reactive ‘threat’ response. Sending someone into amygdala hijack defeats the purpose of sharing feedback and is sure to elicit a negative reaction.

It is also important to pay attention to the receiver’s VIBE™ (how their Voice sounds, their Intellect or words shared, their Body language, and their Energy) to determine how the feedback is being received, whether you should proceed, or whether you should hold off. Often body language can say more than words.

3. Package and Deliver: the art of delivering feedback

Have you ever been mailed a present only to arrive on your doorstep torn, drenched, and with a half-hearted sorry note from the post office attached? Gift giving is as much about the how, as it is about the what. Feedback delivery is no different.

Package and deliver your feedback carefully. You do not want to obscure constructive feedback with half-hearted compliments. But you do not want to launch into an all-out attack by critiquing without showing human care. You can create a safe environment for your colleague by clarifying the
purpose of the feedback. State your intention to support their future development and to create a more holistic picture for them to grow from— one that acknowledges both hits and misses.

We suggest you aim to be direct, specific and highly descriptive. For example, you might describe an event that illustrates your feedback. Offer your observation of the event, the key moments, witnessed behaviour and the impact, then present what you believe are the key opportunities for improvement. Make it clear that you are offering your considered views of the person’s approach or behaviour and not of the person themselves. You might even share a similar misstep of your own and how you learned from it. This reaffirms the humanity of both parties and helps to build further trust and rapport.

Make sure you reiterate your colleague’s value to the organisation. Highlight how their unique strengths support the business and could help them navigate more favourably in future. The more specific and descriptive you can be, the more useful and actionable the feedback potentially is.

4. Be Generous: create a culture of giving

The 25th of December has not always been a gift-giving affair, and yet as more and more people participated in the gift exchange, over time it became ingrained in western culture as Christmas. You can do the same with feedback.

A movement always starts with one. You could be the “lone nut” that kicks off your culture of feedback. So push through the fear. Be generous with feedback, and invite others to do the same. By giving feedback more often and making it a regular part of your culture, you will get better at it, and you will normalise the process for your team.
RECEIVING FEEDBACK

1. Accept Graciously: listen and evaluate

Imagine a gift carefully chosen and exquisitely wrapped, only to be ripped open and thoughtlessly cast aside. Gift exchange is just that: an exchange, and it deserves both parties’ full attention and care.

When exchanging feedback, it is essential that both parties show consideration for each other’s perspective. We each have a deep human need to feel heard, and if you deny another this need, you run the risk of destroying trust, provoking a negative response and harming the relationship. To show each other respect, listen carefully to each other’s point of view.

The key is listening to understand, not listening to reply. Listening to reply involves thinking about what you want to say while someone else is speaking. Your mind is distracted. Closed. Too preoccupied with your own perspective, resulting in overlooked details, misconstrued meaning, snap judgements and knee-jerk reactions. Listening to understand means letting go of judgement and igniting curiosity. You treat each time someone else speaks as an opportunity to learn something new. You focus on the other person and keep your mind open. You pay close attention to words, inflection and body language as clues to true meaning. You let feedback sit with you before formulating your response.

When evaluating feedback, recognise that your initial emotional response is likely fear-driven and may cloud the intended meaning. Resist the impulse to begin framing your response until you have taken the time to consider what is truly meant by their comments. Ask curious, clarifying questions to ensure you clearly understand meaning.
2. Say thank you: appreciate the gift of feedback

As children, how many times are we told that we must say thank you for any gift — even if it isn’t what we’d hoped for. It turns out this piece of advice is more than just a handy lesson in common courtesy.

If there is one key takeaway for receiving feedback, this is it: Remember to say thank you. You may feel the impulse to defend against negative feedback. Or, you may find yourself trying to downplay positive feedback out of embarrassment. Resist. A simple thank you creates trust. It lets the giver know that their feedback has been heard and is appreciated. Remember, giving feedback can be just as scary as receiving it. A thank you acknowledges the giver’s courage to place themselves in a vulnerable position, which invites them to repeat this behaviour in future. In this way, a simple thank you opens the door to a culture of feedback.

3. Put it to use: take action

Have you ever opened a gift only to be confronted with a puzzling, seemingly useless contraption? Your first impulse may be to re-gift or throw it away but sage advice would be to give it a whirl first. You may take a shine to it, or it could come in handy.

Likewise, you are under no obligation to take feedback onboard or put it to use. Your first impulse might be to dismiss any comments as a matter of opinion or a misunderstanding — particularly if the feedback has come unexpectedly, or you disagree with what is said.

But let it sit for a few days. Try putting the feedback into practice. You may be surprised at how valuable the gift truly is.

Interested in learning more about the art of giving and receiving feedback? Performance Frontiers have developed a suite of models and practical tools that we would love to share with you — just give our team a shout: info@performancefrontiers.com

Or, if you have any feedback, feel free to leave a comment.

We will be sure to say thank you.
If you’d like to keep those neurons firing:


Fessler, L. & Hy, K. “How to give feedback that actually works, without hurting anyone more than you have to”, 9 April 2018: https://work.qz.com/1238966/how-to-give-feedback-more-effectively/


Headlee, C. “10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation”, 8 March 2016: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R1vskiVDwl4
