How Do We Give and Receive Feedback?

Feedback may be the single, most useful factor in self-development. Feedback lets us know whether or not our behaviour, knowledge, skills or communication is achieving intended outcomes. It is information that indicates that we may need to adjust in some way, apply more effort or change our approach altogether. This section shares ideas on how to give and receive feedback, constructively.

ABOUT FEEDBACK

Some people talk about ‘constructive criticism’. Others insist that criticism is never constructive but it is clear that we need both positive and constructive feedback to stay on course.

Dr Matthew White put it like this:

“Positive feedback is like the wind in your sails. Corrective feedback is like a rudder to keep us on course.”

It takes a certain kind of courage, caring and communication to give or receive effective feedback. It is a step into the unknown that can unlock the hidden potential of unrecognised strengths and provide opportunities for development and personal growth.

The “Johari Window” (shown below) provides a useful model for understanding the value of feedback. Notice that open communication is increased through self-disclosure and feedback, if you can build the trust and skill to use them appropriately.

Feedback reduces your blindspot and self-disclosure reduces what you normally keep hidden from view. This opens your potential personal and professional growth. The confidentiality of a mentoring conversation is an ideal space to explore this.

Most of us can recall a time when we obtained valuable feedback. Sometimes it can create a turning point in our career or personal lives. Yet feedback can be difficult to obtain, hard to take and even harder to give.

A major difficulty is the level of discomfort experienced when people attempt to share what may be sensitive information. Defensiveness including denial, rejection or ‘counter-attack’ often occurs which inhibits self-awareness and the opportunity to receive and provide feedback is often lost. A key component of effective feedback therefore, is to reduce the level of discomfort associated with feedback.

An Example:

A colleague was making a career transition. After years in one specialised field she wanted to move into another. She knew that she had transferable skills and expertise that was as relevant in the new field as the old one. She prepared a resume that “sold” her talents well. She obtained interviews for several senior positions but did not win the jobs. She was told that she “came second” on several occasions.

This was useful feedback, it told her that she was not so far off track, that the goal was likely to be achieved but provided insufficient information to make adjustments in her approach.

Fortunately, she was eventually able to meet with a member of an interview panel and discuss specific shortcomings. She learned that interviewers were put off because she used terminology from her old field instead of the industry language of the new field. Her choice of words was disqualifying her. This was easily rectified and she obtained the next position for which she applied.
GENERAL FEEDBACK STRATEGIES

Some general strategies include:

• Acknowledge the potential discomfort of the situation.
• Express thoughts and feelings appropriately. Language, voice, tone and non-verbal cues, support or inhibit effectiveness.
• Focus on observable behaviour rather than inferred personality attributes. People may do things that seem stupid but labelling a person stupid is counter-productive.
• To provide motivation, discuss the likely consequences of continuing or changing actions.
• Maintain an outcome orientation. What result do they want? Why is it important to them?
• Keep a sense of proportion. Feedback is just information; it need not be a catastrophe.

WHEN GIVING FEEDBACK

• Avoid generalisations, vague or ambiguous descriptions. Offer specific examples: “you don't think strategically enough” is less helpful than “there are several major issues that you overlooked in your analysis”
• Acknowledge emotional responses, allow ventilation but don’t get side tracked. Keep the communication goal-oriented; the purpose of feedback is to reflect on what happened in the past in order to improve actions in the future.
• Critique only actions within a person’s control but encourage them to take responsibility. For example, failure to complete a project on time because suppliers missed deadlines could be due to unforeseeable external factors, or it could be a result of poor project management.
• Develop improvement strategies. Ideally, you will elicit these during the discussion and provide suggestions when needed.
• Ensure that a plan of action is agreed and follow-up to review results. Acknowledge success and further adjustments needed.

WHEN RECEIVING FEEDBACK

• Recognise the value of feedback - when you don’t know what you don’t know you can’t learn.
• Accept your emotions but avoid overreacting and defer overt responses.
• Clarify information. Obtain specific instances. Ask why an action was problematic. Seek examples of alternative ways of handling the situation. Avoid defensive behaviour such as denial, rationalisation or blaming others. Excuses ease the pain but they are also disempowering and can lead to feelings of victimisation and helplessness.
• Discuss strategies that will enable you to achieve desired outcomes. Think about the resources, support or coaching you may need and work out a plan to get it.
• Act on your plan and provide feedback about the results to anyone considerate enough to have provided input.
• Remember, someone once said: “There's no such thing as mistakes – only learning opportunities”.

For tools and resources please visit go.unimelb.edu.au/3d7

1 Dr Matthew White, of Teach For Australia, speaking on Positive Psychology, at the Australian Association of Graduate Employers conference, 2010