

**Communication:**  
**The Art of Giving Feedback**  
**Participant's Guide**



**LifeWorks**  
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Improving business. Improving lives.

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## Introduction

Feedback is a powerful communication tool. It can help people understand their behaviour and learn things about themselves that they might not have considered. Although it provides an opportunity for growth and development, some people struggle with giving corrective feedback to others at work or in their personal lives. Without knowing *how* to give feedback, it can be uncomfortable and unpleasant for both the giver of feedback and the receiver.

This seminar is designed to provide a *basic* understanding of the importance of feedback at work and in personal relationships, the barriers to effective feedback, and the process of providing constructive feedback and praise.

## About Feedback

### ***Feedback is...***

Information one person gives to another about that person's behaviour (not his attitude):

- constructive and corrective criticism
- praise

### **Effective feedback helps people...**

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### **Barriers to giving feedback are...**

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# Effective feedback helps people . . .

## **Realize how their behaviour affects others**

People need to know the effect their behaviour has on others – both positive and negative. People value positive rewards such as praise for their achievements. Giving positive feedback lets them know what they are doing that’s right, and it motivates them to keep doing it!

## **Recognize if their intentions are supported by appropriate behaviour**

Without feedback, we’re working in the dark. While we tend to judge ourselves by our good intentions, others evaluate us by our behaviours – what they observe or think they observe. Our intentions may be good and honorable, but without feedback we don’t know if we have acted on them – or how successfully we’ve acted on them – or if they are indeed the right intentions.

## **Learn how to be better at their job, grow professionally, and improve productivity**

One of the principles of adult learning is that adults need regular feedback. It facilitates personal and professional growth, reinforces appropriate behaviour and effectiveness, and improves performance. It keeps people on track. It helps people learn how to get good at their job, or tasks, or relationships with others.

## **Maintain positive relationships at work and in personal life**

Some people believe that if you have ideas that will help someone else perform better, it’s detrimental not to let them know. We pay a price if we do not give feedback – the person will continue their ineffective behaviour, won’t learn, and may negatively affect productivity and interpersonal relationships. We have a responsibility to let those people we work with and have relationships with know how they are behaving.

## **Address issues and problems before they get bigger**

Feedback prevents problems from mushrooming since the “issue” gets addressed before it can fester or get worse. As Patricia McLagan and Peter Krembs, authors of On The Level: Communicating About Performance say, “*Nothing* drains energy and trust from an organization like telling half-truths and avoiding unpleasant feedback. Direct communication is a right and a responsibility that we should all share, no matter what our role or position.”

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## Barriers to giving feedback

### **Not knowing how to give feedback**

An ineffective approach could prevent the other person from hearing our message, and/or they could become defensive. As a result, we may not provide feedback.

### **Fear of confrontation and conflict**

We may have a fear of conflict or confrontation, believing that the feedback could damage the relationship with the other person.

### **Fear of hurting the other person**

If you have had a bad experience receiving feedback, you may be afraid that you will hurt the other person by saying something critical, or that you might say something that will be received as a judgment of the person's value. Constructive criticism – even though it may be given effectively – can sometimes still have a “bite” to it.

In contrast, a discomfort with giving praise could come from a belief that commending others for their good work can spoil them.

### **Belief that the problem will go away or that the person will change on their own**

We believe that by ignoring a problem, it will go away. This might be good response for something trivial, but in general, most problems don't disappear on their own. They need attention. If not, they tend to grow and become worse.

## ***Set the stage by asking four important questions***

Setting the stage is the key to the process of giving feedback whether it's at work or in personal life. If you and the other person share common goals, if you've created an environment of trust, and if you've made expectations clear and encouraged learning, the other person will be more receptive to constructive criticism. These all support the notion that feedback should produce learning for improved performance and should strengthen relationships. The following questions can help you focus on the importance of compassion, wisdom, and tact when giving feedback.

- Have I established a trusting, respectful, learning environment?
- Have I set realistic expectations with the other person?
- If I were the person, how would I want to be told?
- How will this feedback help the person change, learn, and be more successful?

## Giving better feedback

The following strategies can help you provide effective feedback at work and in your personal life.

### **Be calm and reaffirming**

Be aware of your tone and pitch. Even if you are angry, maintain control in the way you present your feedback. Indicate by tone or words that the relationship is intact and that you believe in the ability to make the necessary change. For example:

- “Sarah, I know that when you will be late coming home from your friend’s house, you will call me. You know how I worry.” (Hug)
- “Bob, you did a great job with our new clients; I know that you can do the same with Stevenson Products in spite of the conflict you had with them.”

### **Be descriptive, not evaluative**

Describe what you observe about the other person’s behaviour and the effect it has on you, others, or the organization (if at work). Put it in a business context. Focus on decisions and behaviours.

- “When you decided to send the report without having the team give their input, we lost an opportunity to get more ideas.”
- “I feel frustrated when you ask me how you can help, and I tell you what would be helpful, and then you don’t do those things.”
- “When you don’t get back to me with the information I need for my project, it delays my work.”

Avoid talking about individual abilities, traits, or personality. When you comment on these, you can become evaluative or judgmental, resulting in a greater likelihood that the other person will respond defensively:

- “I don’t have a bad attitude!”
- “I’m perfectly capable of making my own decisions in those matters.”

### **Be specific; avoid general comments**

Avoid using words such as: always, never, or all since they are general, evaluative, and aren’t helpful.

For example, instead of saying, “You’re always late to meetings,” say,

- “The last team meetings we had, you walked in between 15-20 minutes late. As a result, you missed important information about the Jackson account.”
- “It’s important for you to be with the team for the entire meeting so that you will have input and hear all that we discuss.”

### **Be realistic**

Direct your feedback toward a change that the person is capable of making. For example: Indicate the consequences of the person's behavior.

- "When you get angry and yell, I don't want to talk with you."
- "When I give you feedback and you become defensive, I feel that you are not listening to the specific examples I've given you."

### **Be timely**

Usually feedback is best given as close to the time of the given behaviour as possible. When you wait too long to give feedback, the receiver might feel that there's not much she can do about it or that it's not important. The receiver may become angry or disinterested. Certainly if you're giving praise, have it come on the heels of the positive behaviour.

Sometimes, however, you may need to wait a day or two if you or the other person is very emotional about what has transpired. This will give you time to get back into control, and the other person can cool down so he may be better able to hear what you have to say. At work, you may also have time to get support from others such as HR, and your manager.

Sometimes we may want to wait, hoping that the person will make the necessary changes on her own. As we said earlier, the person may have good intentions, but may not have been able to put them into action. By waiting, we can become frustrated and annoyed, and the person might not learn about the negative effect of her behavior.

Seek appropriate time and place:

- "Would you like some feedback about your new ideas for the Bentley project? Is there a time that will work for you?"
- "I have some thoughts to share with you about your presentation. What would be a good time to discuss them?"

### **Be clear and concise**

Use words that are clear and understandable. You may need to ask the other person to paraphrase what you've said in order to make sure that they understands your message. For example:

- "Do you understand what I mean when I say you send double messages? Please give me an example. Thank you."

Keep your feedback short enough to get your point across; don't go "on and on." Sometimes the more you say, the harder it is for the other person to hear the important points, and you may find yourself lessening your resolve. Be clear about what action you expect the person to take. For example:

- "Please call Tom and let him know how you will correct the error."
- "In the future, please answer the customer phone line within two rings."
- "Please clean up your dishes in the sink before I come home from work."

## **Be aware that the person might not accept your constructive criticism**

We want to believe that others want to know when they erred and are interested in learning how they can do better. However, some people will not receive your feedback positively. Perhaps they need to think about it before they can “own” it. Others may not accept it at all. It’s always the person’s choice to accept feedback or not. If the person doesn’t accept your feedback, he will need to deal with the consequences of his inappropriate behavior. You may need to take additional steps if that behavior interferes with co-workers. Your manager and HR staff can help you. In personal relationships, you might consider counseling for resolving differences. Your employee assistance program can help you.

## **Case studies**

Read the situations below, and take turns giving constructive feedback by using some of the tips provided.

### **Situation 1**

Ryan has been with the organization for over a year after having come from another company that had a very different culture. Ryan has a hard time adjusting to the formality of your organization. He will frequently interrupt you while you’re working, ask for unimportant things, talk too loudly on the phone, and tell too many jokes.

### **Situation 2**

Your in-laws expect you to travel to their home for the holidays. In the past you’ve found it difficult since they often speak negatively about various ethnic groups. It bothers you and your husband since you both value differences and are respectful. You are also concerned that your young children will hear the prejudiced comments.

### **Situation 3**

Jennifer has worked her way up the organization. She’s bright, creative, and hard working. You’ve enjoyed working with her since she’s also fun and lively. Lately, however, you’ve noticed that when you share ideas, she uses yours in her work without giving you credit.

### **Situation 4**

Brenda has been your friend for many years. You’ve always trusted her with your confidence. She’s made some new friends at work and has invited them to your social gatherings. You’ve noticed that these people have said things that surprised you. You think that Brenda has shared some of your private information with them.

### **Situation 5**

Don has an abrasive, abrupt communication style that turns people off. This behavior is getting in the way of Don’s working effectively with his co-workers.



## Giving praise

Feedback is not only about correction; it's also a way to let someone know that they've done a good job. How would you give praise to the people in the following situations?

A co-worker wins a company-sponsored contest for high performance.

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A co-worker has been able to retain a client who was thinking of going to another vendor.

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Your friend gets a promotion and a considerable salary increase.

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Your son's 5<sup>th</sup> grade report card has the highest grades this year.

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Your friend has recently lowered his cholesterol through diet and exercise.

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## Additional tips for effective feedback

There are other strategies that can be useful. Some of the following are more appropriate for a work setting, and others can enhance interpersonal relationships at home, with friends, and other people.

- Share your own experience with a similar behavior. For example, if a co-worker or subordinate has made a mistake that you once made, let her know what the experience was like for you and how you handled it: “That’s happened to me, too. Here’s what I did to remedy the error...”
- Choose an appropriate place that’s private. When giving corrective feedback, make sure that other employees, family members, or friends cannot hear the conversation. Be sensitive to how the other person will “take” your comments.
- Emphasize correct performance instead of stressing what was done wrong. Although it’s important to point out errors, mistakes, or misbehavior, focus on what the person could do to improve: “Brian, if you answer the customer-call line within two rings, the organization will have a better client rating, and we will be more competitive.”
- Correct one behavior at a time. Don’t store up the person’s misbehaviour and present them all at once. Address each one as it happens.
- Ask the person for their perception of the behaviour. Since giving feedback is a two-way process, encourage discussion. Just because you are giving feedback does not mean that you are right. It’s important to hear the other person’s view of the situation. Sometimes it’s OK to comment on how the other person is reacting to your feedback: “You seem surprised at my comments. Is that true?”
- When possible, avoid using the word, “you.” Instead be more objective. For example, say, “The report lacked the reasons for the changes.”
- Instead of giving the person your feedback, ask them to provide it:
  - What do you think went well?
  - Where could you have done things differently?
  - In what ways could you improve the next time you do...?
- Position feedback as an opportunity for discussion. There may be times when discussion is not necessary, especially if the feedback is about a simple mistake. However, if the issue or problem is more complicated, your conversation can include the following content: what led up to the problem, what was done, what could have been done differently, who else is involved, and what steps need to be taken moving forward.
- Make sure feedback serves both your needs and those of the other person. If the feedback will enable the other person to achieve his goals, meet the expectations you and she agreed upon, learn more, and become better at her job, then her needs will be met. If the feedback focuses only on your needs, then the other person may not be receptive to it.
- Consider using the “sandwich” approach—positive, area needing improvement, positive. Could be disagreement on this strategy. Some people believe that the positive comments dilute the

importance of constructive criticism. If you use this approach, make sure that the situation is appropriate. For example, if employee does great job on a report, but has several errors, then it would work.

- End the conversation with encouraging words.
- Avoid using humor since it doesn't reinforce the feedback and undermines the message.

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*“Criticism should be like a sandwich. If you want to motivate people, slip the criticism in between layers of praise.”*

*Henry C. Rogers, author of Rules for Success*

## What feedback do I need to give?

- The situation and person involved are

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- The person's behaviour affects me in the following way

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- I would like the person to

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- The best time and place to give the feedback is

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- I will say the following:

Calm and reaffirming

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Descriptive and specific

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Realistic

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Clear (about behavior and expectations of action for person to take)

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