

The Art of Giving Feedback

There's an Art to Giving Feedback

From whom would you rather receive work performance feedback - your boss or your coworkers? Many people fear the boss less. That's because supervisors generally follow conventional rules of feedback, which make it easier to accept, while coworkers often take a "no-holds-barred, take-no-prisoners" approach which can be very difficult to handle. As a group, coworkers' feedback can be a force to help you change and grow, even more than a supervisor's, so why not adopt some rules of engagement that will make giving and taking feedback from colleagues more effective and easier to hear? Here are some suggestions.

Put the Focus on Behavior, Not Personality

Focus on your coworkers' behavior, actions, statements, and results when giving feedback, rather than on the people themselves. Feedback is much easier to accept when the person receiving it does not feel their personal worth is being criticized. It is much better to state feedback positively, rather than negatively, when possible. At least, be tactful. Then, offer suggestions on how to improve performance.

It's How You Say It that Counts

For example: 1) Don't say someone was "boring" while giving a presentation, as that labels him or her negatively and hurts self-esteem. Instead, say "Your presentation that could have been more interesting isn't helpful when you say, 'Your presentation wasn't very interesting.' Instead, say 'Your presentation could be improved by changing your delivery and offering details to hold the listeners' attention.'" Then make suggestions, e.g., "Mary, you could speak louder and put more energy into your presentation delivery so people feel your passion." Mary, you could also give details about where you got your idea for the 'whatchamacallit' and how you created a prototype."

3) Tell your colleague what's working well, e.g., "Wow, you really dressed nicely for that presentation, Robert, and it was just the right length. You have a terrific vocabulary!"

Good Things Come in Threes

Employee educators are often advised when giving feedback to "Give three to glow on and one to grow on." Don't overwhelm your colleagues with too much criticism. Focus only on one or two important points. Let your coworkers hear at least three things you appreciated so that they know you value their efforts despite the constructive criticism you're offering.

Resistance Isn't Futile, It's a Good Sign

Listen calmly to what your coworker has to say in response to your feedback. Refuting feedback is often a first step toward a coworker's acceptance of it. It doesn't automatically mean your coworker is in denial; refutation is a normal reaction we experience to protect our egos. The remarks he or she makes should lead to further discussion. You may find that your coworker had valid reasons for doing what you criticized. Use the phrase, "I understand" often. Soon, your coworker may accept that his or her efforts could be improved by your suggestions.

When the Feedback Doesn't Fit

When it's your turn to receive constructive criticism from colleagues, listen carefully, rephrase their comments in your own words, and ask questions. If they have good suggestions, ask for them. Ask for details if they seem well. Don't let your ego get involved! If you feel you had a valid reason for the action they are criticizing, state the reason calmly and ask, "Do you think I should have handled that another way?" When they finish, thank them and tell them you will think carefully about the feedback. You may discover that they have given you excellent ideas for improving your performance. Following these rules of engagement will give you and your colleagues an effective and non-threatening procedure for giving and receiving feedback about work performance.

