



Feedback that Works: How to Build and Deliver Your Message

What is Effective Feedback?

Creating and delivering a specific message based on observed performance is vital to effective feedback. You may have told a fellow manager, a co-worker or even your boss that he is a *good leader* or that she *communicates well*, or that he *needs to be more strategic*. You may believe that such statements are helpful examples of feedback. But these statements only evaluate or interpret, they don't describe specific behaviour that a person can learn and develop by repeating or avoiding that behaviour.

Effective feedback should enable the receiver to walk away understanding exactly what he or she did and what impact it had on you. When the feedback is this specific and this direct, there is a better chance that the person getting the feedback will be motivated to stop, start or continue behaviours that affect performance.

Feedback is most effective when it is little and often, within a short period of time of the behaviour being observed. This way it can be easily recalled – and it can be acted upon immediately. This takes no more than 5 minutes.

Developing Effective Feedback Skills

This job-aid describes a feedback technique called **Situation-Behaviour-Impact**, where you describe the situation, describe the behaviour you observed, and explain the impact that the behaviour has on you.

1. Describe the Situation

The first step is to describe the location and time when a behaviour occurred, so that you create the context for your feedback receiver, helping them to remember clearly their thinking and behaviour at the time.

For example, "Yesterday morning, while we were walking with Dave to the meeting...", or "Today, when you and I were talking at the coffee machine...".

The more specifically you can recall the details of the situation, the clearer your feedback will be.

2. Describe the Observed Behaviour

Describing behaviour is the second step to giving effective feedback. It's also the most crucial and most often omitted. The most common mistake in giving feedback happens when judgments are communicated using adjectives that describe a person but not a person's actions. That kind of feedback is ineffective because it doesn't give the receiver information about what behaviour to stop, start or continue in order to improve performance. Consider the phrases below:

- He was rude during the meeting
- She was engaged during the small-group discussion
- She seemed bored at her team's presentation
- He seemed pleased with the report his employees presented

These phrases describe an observer's impression or interpretation of a behavior.



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Now look at the following list of actions an observer might witness that would lead to those impressions and interpretations:

- He spoke at the same time as another person was speaking
- She leaned forward in her chair, wrote notes after other people spoke, and then communicated her thoughts to the group, repeating some of the things that other people had said
- She yawned, rolled her eyes, and looked out of the window
- He smiled and nodded his head

The phrases in this list use verbs to describe a person's actions. The focus is on the actual behaviour, not on a judgment as to what the behaviour might mean.

When giving people feedback using SBI, it is not only important to capture *what* is said or done, but also *how* it is said and done. You can capture the how by paying attention to three things: body language, tone of voice and speaking manner, and word choice.

3. Explain the Impact

The third step in giving feedback is to relay the impact that the other person's behaviour had on you. The impact you want to communicate is not how you think a person's behaviour might affect the organisation, co-workers, a programme, clients, a product, or any third party. The impact you want to focus on and communicate is *your* reaction to a behavior.

To do this, acknowledge the emotional effect the person's behaviour had on you. *"When you told me in the meeting that my concerns about product deadlines were "overblown", I felt humiliated"*. Your personal reactions to the feedback can't easily be dismissed, as it is a personal experience, so the feedback is more likely to be heard.

4. Explain why it is important

This is a description of what is at stake for the individual, others, the organisation. This can act as a motivator to change.

For positive feedback, you can stop at this point. Good job! Your affirmation will give them a glow for the rest of the day. If you are offering constructive feedback, the next step is to:

5. Identify the part you played in creating the problem (if giving constructive feedback)

If you share up-front how you think you may have been part of the cause, this will prevent possible defensiveness on their part.



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Putting it all together: To develop your effectiveness in giving feedback, practice putting your feedback in this form:

	Situation	Behaviour when you did/said (behaviour)	Impact I felt (impact)	Why is this important?	Your input to the problem
Peer feedback	Sophie, this morning in the hallway,	you asked my opinion about decisions to launch our new product	That makes me feel included, part of the team	It's important for us as a team that we work together for greater impact	-
	Sunil, last night we were leaving,	you said that you weren't clear about my role in this project	I felt hurt	It's important for me that my contribution is recognised	Maybe I haven't been vocal enough about what I am doing behind the scenes
Subordinate feedback	Matt, in the meeting with the new Senior Executive yesterday,	you kept your voice at an even tone, even when she questioned your numbers.	I felt really at ease with your delivery	I can see how she is already starting to trust you as a result.	-
	Gerhard, I read through the report you wrote	in which you had some factual mistakes, such as....	As a result, I feel frustrated	Accuracy is so important for our credibility with the client	It's possible that I sent you the older data as well as the new, in which case I may have confused you.
Boss feedback	Over the past couple of months,	you have not commented once about the reports I have completed.	I feel unimportant	My engagement levels have dropped as a result	I realise I haven't asked for feedback either, and I could have done that.
	Alessandra, yesterday in the conference call with Stephan,	you said that you were pleased with how I had built the relationship with Ben	I want to let you know that makes me feel recognised	It's important to me that I know you see these things	-



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So, you've laid the feedback out on the table, and now it's time to move into coaching mode, that is finding out what the individual thinks and feels and helping them to move to a solution. For this, you can use the GROW model, Goal, Reality, Options, Way Forward (from John Whitmore).

6. Reemphasise your goal for this conversation

Something like: "I want us to figure out how to resolve this issue – the effect your mistakes are making on our credibility with the client".

7. Ask the individual to share the reality as they see it

In your own words, express something like the following: "I am really interested in learning your perspective. How do you see this?"

Now, continue to listen and ask open questions about *their reality*.

8. Explore options

- What options can you think of for solving this issue?
- What else?
- What else?

9. Decide upon the way forward

- Of these options, which are you going to put into action?
- What are you going to do for each of the options? Break them into steps.
- When are you going to do each of the steps?
- Who will you approach for support?
- What will you say to them?
- When will you talk to them?
- What support do you need from me?
- When shall we review progress?

10. Finally, **follow up** with the individual to give them continuous feedback about this behaviour – both positive to affirm them and any changes they are making; and developmental where they are still having trouble.

Points of delivery

- When you approach someone to offer feedback, use a phrase such as "May I share an observation with you?" This open approach, in which you ask permission, can ease anxiety and sets the scene for a conversation, not a confrontation.
- To create more openness around the notion of feedback, take opportunities to offer positive feedback more than offering developmental feedback. The ratio of positive to negative statements in high performing organisations is 5.6 to 1 (Kim S. Cameron, Positive Leadership). In poor performing, struggling organisations, the ratio was as low as 0.36 to 1. It is as important that people know what behaviour to repeat as it is for them to understand what they should stop and start.



Clare Norman
coaching associates ltd.

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- Acknowledge the uneasiness or discomfort you may feel when giving a person feedback. Say something like “As I am telling you this, I’m aware of how uncomfortable I am”. A simple acknowledgment honours your experience and can minimize the perceived threat of the feedback experience from the receiver’s perspective.

Recreated with the kind permission of the Center for Creative Leadership, based on Feedback that Works, Sloan R. Weitzel; and Sir John Whitmore’s GROW model from Coaching for Performance.