

Leadership NOTES

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Giving Effective Feedback

Have you provided feedback to a colleague and encountered defensiveness or resistance? Feedback is difficult for many people to hear. It frequently does not match their intentions or their self-image. As a result, the message can get lost amidst what the receiver perceives to be an unwarranted attack.

How can we reduce the likelihood of defensiveness and increase the probability that our message will be heard and acted upon? Try these tips:

Be timely and prompt – Feedback is most effective when it is given as promptly as possible after the observed event. The more recent the event, the more relevant the feedback. However, it may be necessary at times to take a deep breath and delay providing the feedback if you are still upset about what you observed. It helps reduce defensiveness if you aren't angry at the receiver. Take time to collect your thoughts so you can present the feedback without an emotional edge.

State your good intentions – Communicate your reason for providing the feedback. For example, "I would like to make sure that we are following proper procedures so we don't overlook any critical steps in our process." This signals that you are more interested in correcting the problem rather than punishing the individual.

Be descriptive rather than evaluative – Describe what actions, behaviors, impacts, or results you have observed without passing judgment on the behavior. This leaves the individual free to determine whether this matches what was intended. Taking this stance lessens the pressure to justify the actions taken and reduces the likelihood of defensiveness, so the receiver can focus on whether there is a need to correct. If they report to you and can't see the need for the correction, you can help by pointing out the consequences of not making the correction. Generally, people like to feel they have a choice. Pointing out what the consequences are of one choice versus another creates less resistance than insisting they follow a particular course of action.

Be specific rather than general – Telling someone that they were "careless" or "sloppy" fails to point out exactly what it is the receiver did that should be corrected. Instead, describe the specific behaviors and how you or others were affected by it. A statement like, "When the customer asked you to verify her payment, I saw you look the information up in our new database and inform her that we had not. You did not follow our procedures that require you to also verify payment in the legacy database. She insisted that she had made the payment and requested to speak to a supervisor. Conducting verification in both systems would have avoided the inaccurate information and the ensuing conflict."

Take into account the needs of the receiver as well as your needs – If you are angry about the impacts of the action the receiver has taken, resist the temptation to let them have it or set them straight. This is very likely to lead to defensiveness and do more harm than good. Consider that the receiver did not likely intend for these negative consequences and would appreciate being informed in a manner that does not imply you are making that assumption.

Direct the feedback towards behavior the receiver can do something about – Reminding someone of a shortcoming over which he or she has no control only serves to frustrate the receiver. Concentrate on behavior, capabilities, and results that are within the individual's control.

Check to ensure clear communication – Before walking away, verify that the receiver understood the message you intended to deliver as well as your motives. A good way to do this is ask them to repeat, in their own words, what you are asking them to do – and why.

Lastly, feedback will be most effective if it is requested by the receiver rather than imposed. Informing the individual that you have some feedback and asking if they are willing to hear it now can go a long way toward ensuring a more positive response.