

## Feedback Skills

Everyone needs to know that their work performance is meeting expectations and is valued. They also need to know if their work is not meeting expectations. This is one of the important purposes of performance review and professional development programs. While almost everyone will say that they want feedback, most will also say that they do not receive enough, or it is not sufficiently frequent.

### Giving feedback

Feedback conversations should have the following features:

- *Timely.* Give feedback as soon after the event as possible. Giving and receiving of feedback is a routine matter in learning organisation styled workplaces. Practice builds competence and keeps the impact more routine.
- *Specific.* Deal with a particular topic or issue. It is even more effective for the respondent to frame the issue to be considered in advance. Feedback should address specific skill deficits rather than being of a general nature. For example "*The sequence of arguments in the letter mean it is not strongly persuasive*" is more specific than "*The letter is not persuasive enough*". The focus is on identifying what the respondent can do to rectify the problem.
- *Prioritised.* Address the most important issue as first priority. More than three issues may be a waste of time and could overwhelm the respondent.
- *Objective.* Address the behaviour, not the personality of the respondent. Evidence-based observations are most persuasive. For example "*You are overbearing*" is less helpful than "*The way you said that was overbearing*".
- *Balanced.* Address both achievements and areas for improvement. Respondents tend to hear only the negative feedback unless the giving of feedback is frequent, two-way and framed.
- *Realistic.* Feedback is intended to bring about improvement. The improvement being sought must be within the capacity of the respondent to achieve in the context in which they are working. Context includes their capabilities, time, resources, organisational constraints, and other priorities.
- *Authentic.* Own your feedback. Say "*I think it is not up to the expected standard*". Professional judgement is reasonable. Avoid saying "*Others may think...*" or "*The boss said to tell you...*".
- *Supportive.* The purpose of feedback is improvement. Feedback should be provided with a positive intent, and accompanied by genuine offers of support to address the issues being raised.

### Structure of a Feedback Session

This is a suggested template for a feedback session based on Corporate Leadership Council research.

1. Initiating the session by seeking to help with the respondent's current needs and future goals.
2. Establish the goal or purpose of the session.
3. Use open questions to encourage respondent to define both their achievements and challenges.
4. Use open questions to encourage the respondent to identify the areas for further development.
5. Highlight observations and information that describes the current reality of the situation.

6. Provide feedback on both achievements and areas of performances that require development.
7. Identify the facts of challenges the respondent agrees with and identify options for address them.
8. Ask what support the respondent needs.
9. Communicate and explain training and developmental opportunities.
10. Build an action plan with a timeline.
11. Determine date for follow-up meeting.

### ***Receiving feedback***

Start with the assumption that the giver is reluctant to give feedback because they are wary of making the situation worse. A second assumption is that the giver may not be familiar with the skills of giving feedback. To encourage receiving feedback the following techniques are helpful:

- *Seek feedback.* Be proactive in asking others to give feedback before the event. Ask for the feedback immediately after the event as a debriefing.
- *Frame the feedback.* Ask for feedback on a particular issue. For example *structuring interviews, phone etiquette* or *dealing with angry respondents*. This will focus the observer to concentrate on one or two issues only.
- *Listen quietly to the feedback.* Receivers of feedback frequently want to explain themselves or argue about key points. Just listen and take notes without doing anything but using simple encouragers and clarifying meaning. (Seek first to understand).
- *Reflect.* After the feedback is received, spend some time thinking about what is being said. Usually this will mean allowing some time to mindfully process the information. Feedback usually arouses emotions, especially sadness, although fear and anger can also be aroused. It takes 5-10 minutes for these emotions to subside. Feedback can be considered with more clarity after arousal has subsided.
- *Follow-up.* The follow-up should focus on what to do to rectify the issue being raised. Support may be through training, practice, shadowing, modelling, reading, formal study or job rotation.
- *Action.* Prepare a plan of action based on the reflection and follow-up considerations and offers of support. This action plan should address *what, how, when, by whom, with what resources*, and *how will you know it succeeded*. Make a commitment to yourself. The source of the resources must also commit to the plan.

Develop similar plans for other areas to be addressed. A maximum of three issues should be addressed at any one time. These plans form the respondent's professional development program.

## **Negative feedback: The SPIN model ( by Jo Owen)**

SPIN is a classic and simple framework for giving feedback:

- ***S: Situation and specifics***

Give feedback in the right situation: when the person is calm and the event is still fresh in the mind. Do not give feedback when people are angry, stressed, upset or very busy. When you give feedback, be specific about your purpose (why are you doing this?) and the circumstances and the event.

- ***P: Personal impact***

Do not judge the other person: that invites conflict. Tell the person how his or her actions made you feel: feelings are irrefutable. For example, say 'You have turned up late to three client meetings: it makes me feel you think they are unimportant' not 'You are a lazy idler', or 'I was very embarrassed when the CFO saw the errors in the budget you prepared' not 'You are an innumerate scumbag.'

- ***I: Insight and inquiry***

Ask questions to see if the person understands the problem, to help him or her explore and evaluate options and to discover the way forward. Avoid telling people: make them learn for themselves.

- ***N: Next steps***

Mutually agree what happens next. There needs to be a positive way forward. You need to have thought through possible options and actions. But, at this point, it is often better to go into coaching mode and get the person to generate the options and the way forward. The person may come up with a better and more relevant solution than yours. In any event, people will feel more committed to their solutions than they will to yours.

Get the person to summarize the next steps. This is the best way to check for understanding: people can only summarize well if they have heard and understood well. The act of summarizing will also help people consolidate their own thinking and they will remember the feedback much better and, it is to be hoped, positively. Follow up in writing to confirm the understanding