

## Principles and Practices for Giving and Getting Effective Feedback

“Feedback” -- an overused term for a communication process that is often taken for granted in small groups and classrooms. Effective feedback doesn’t just happen, it is a set of skills that must be learned and practiced. The key word here is “effective.”

A group of individuals skilled in giving and receiving good feedback expands the possibilities of any learning situation.

### Giving Feedback to a colleague is effective if it is...

- 1. Specific rather than General:** Give details about what strengths you see and suggestions for change you have. Words like good, bad, fine, or uninteresting are not useful to someone listening for what worked and what didn’t in their presentation. Why was it good? What specifically was not of interest? Avoid giving a verbal checkmark.
- 2. Descriptive rather than Judgmental:** You are giving feedback on the project, not the person. Just describe your reactions and avoid judgments. Using clear “I” statements reduces the need of the receiver to respond defensively and ups the chance that he/she will be able to use what you had to say.
- 3. Directed toward a behavior the receiver can do something about:** Effective feedback is valuable information which can be used to strengthen future projects. However, making changes must be within the receiver’s control.
- 4. Well-timed:** The best time to give feedback is when someone asks for it. If feedback is solicited, you can be sure the receiver will be listening. In general, feedback is most effective when given immediately. Be aware of the context and readiness of the receiver to get the feedback.
- 5. Takes into account both the giver and receiver.** Just because you have something to say doesn’t mean you have to say it – feedback is a two-way exchange. Check in with yourself to identify your motives for giving feedback. Ask yourself “Will this be of use to the receiver?” Although you can’t control whether or not feedback will be used, you do have control over what you say and how you say it.

And not all situations call for this type of critical and reflective feedback. When you want information to help you do a better job, when you are willing to give that type of feedback – then use these principles and practices.

### EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK IS NOT...

- ...a description of what you think the receiver wants to hear
- ...a personal advertisement or your time in the sun
- ...a waste of time
- ...used as a weapon

## Receiving Feedback is also a Critical Skill

Receiving Feedback is enhanced if you can...



- 1. Avoid explaining or defending “why I did that.”** *Basically, you don’t owe anyone an explanation. If you can step out of a defensive posture, it will be more possible that you will be able to hear and make decisions about using feedback provided.*
- 2. Remember -- feedback is only one person’s perception of your action, not universal truth.** *Reframe the process of getting feedback in your own mind. It is not a judgment.*
- 3. Wait until the feedback has been given before you say anything.** *Don’t trample on the possibility that the person giving feedback might say something you can use. Take it in; listen. Try to avoid constructing responses and looking for loopholes.*
- 4. Accept that giving feedback is hard and choose not to make it harder through your body language, attitude or retort** *Think of good feedback as a gift.*
- 5. Help the giver stick with the criteria for giving good feedback.** *For example, you might say -- “A specific example would help me better understand your point.”*
- 6. If you see a pattern in the feedback you are getting from several sources, check it out.**

## KEY FEEDBACK WORDS – A VOCABULARY OF POWER

### ***"THANK YOU"***

When receiving feedback, practice just saying “thank you” without explanation. Just “Thank you” -- and then zip it. Do this excruciating little exercise until you get used to the idea that you can take or leave any or all of what is said. Feedback is an exchange. Just because someone puts it all out there doesn't mean you have to take it all in. Take part of it or leave it all.

The urge to explain, clarify, defend, or just talk will be very strong. It will feel odd to not follow up with your own commentary. Do it anyway. Responding with a simple “thank you” will get easier and easier with practice; soon you really will be able to just say thank you -- and mean it.

OK, so if you are not one who uses “thank you” easily -- smile and nod, do your own interpretation of a simple thank you. Just don't launch into edifying explanation.

### ***"I LIKE"***

Take responsibility for what you say. Feedback framed as “I” statements is more effective.

Significant, specific details go well with “I like” Take care to remain in the context of feedback on issues, not on the person.

But remember, just because you like it doesn't make it right; just because you don't like something doesn't make it wrong. It just means you like it or don't like it.

Show respect by being honest. Don't make it up.

### ***"HOW ABOUT..."***

When giving feedback, replace “you should” with “how about” as your lead-in phrase.

“How about” reframes the feedback as a possibility to be considered rather than a mandate to be taken. The receiver always has the choice of what to take and leave; this term is confirmation that the feedback is one person's opinion, not universal truth.

Presenting a “how about” is a suggestion for change and works best in a descriptive format.

I've seen “Consider...” used in place of “How about...” Either term works well during feedback sessions. As a caution -- voice tone and body language can transform “how about” into a command or judgment masquerading as a choice.

### ***"LOSE THE “BUT BRIDGE”***

“I really liked your presentation BUT it was a little too long.” This type of feedback gets processed and translated into “I didn't like it because it was too long.” The “but bridge” has negated both parts of the feedback phrase.

If you can't see any strengths or “I likes” then your perception is too one-sided to comprise effective feedback. Consider stepping back.

The danger of the “But Bridge” is that it can be used to mask a negative with a false positive.

When feedback is given using the Key Principles discussed here, all feedback has the possibility of being effective. Both givers and receivers can transcend the “positive” and “negative” labels.

