

Feedback That's Tough on Problems, Not on People

By Malory Fischer



Malory Fischer, president of Communication Concepts Training, Inc., leads workshops to increase efficiency and innovation through clear and collaborative communication. She can be reached at malory@cctraining.com or at (732) 469-1387.

Feedback is supposed to be helpful. After all, isn't that why negative feedback is called *constructive* criticism? The reality is, though, that most of us have received feedback that's felt a lot more like a punch in the gut than a helping hand. You know the kind...

"You're not pulling your weight, Sally" or "You obviously misunderstood the parameters, Jim."

Comments like these often generate knee-jerk responses that are defensive. Why? Because the remark comes across as an attack – not an attack on the problem at hand, but an attack on the person receiving the feedback.

But feedback doesn't have to be used like a club. Whether you're communicating upward, downward, or across an organization, negative feedback can be as a tool to improve work processes, nurture business relationships, and get the outcomes you want. So let's start with how to make criticism constructive.

1. Start with an observation: "I haven't received the budget figures for your department, Steve."

Notice that the observation begins with *I*, not *you*. Statements that begin with *I* tend to sound more neutral than *you* statements and are likely to begin a rational conversation. On the other hand, critical statements that begin with *you* tend to sound blaming, and the receiver often responds defensively. That's human nature: to defend ourselves when attacked. So if the manager barks, "You're late again in sending your budget figures, Steve," then Steve will likely shoot back, "I can't send you the figures until I hear from my team, and I have too many other things to do besides chasing down information from everyone else."

So defensiveness can *derail* productive communication, with comments spiraling into an angry exchange. Then, too, there's the possibility that the recipient will respond passively to the initial criticism, taking it quietly, even if it's unjustified. However, silent suffering doesn't bode well for future cooperation any more than anger and conflict do.

2. Next, elaborate with expressions such as, "I think" or "I feel."

Describe the crux of the issue from an *I* perspective. In the case of the overdue budget figures, the manager might follow his initial observation with, "I'm concerned that if I don't get all the figures in time to present them well at the budget meeting on Friday, I may not be able to secure the funding we need." With this comment, the speaker describes the business problem in objective terms.

3. Finally, describe what you want and ask for input.

"I'd really like to get those figures this afternoon. Is that possible?"



Instead of demanding compliance, the manager uses a question to pull Steve into the problem-solving process. Steve now has the opportunity to discuss his overloaded schedule and uncooperative teammates, and he and his manager can put their heads together to come up with a solution.

During this problem-solving phase of the conversation, it may also help to dig for more information with phrases like these:

“Can you tell me what you think the problem is?”

“Can you help me understand what happened?”

Try to avoid leading with, “Why did you...?” because *why* questions also have the habit of triggering defensiveness.

If the problem has occurred repeatedly, a follow-up may be necessary: “I’d like to work together to avoid this situation in the future. It sounds like we have to think about work flow and priorities. So let’s set up a meeting next week to discuss the some ideas.”

Whatever you do, if you want to increase the chances of your feedback having positive outcomes:

- Avoid words like *always* and *never*. Generalizations and exaggeration tend to backfire. If my team leader reprimands me with, “You’re *always* late for meetings,” I may respond with a nitpicky, “I was on time for the meeting last week.”
- Avoid decrees like “you have to” or “you should.” The tone of the stern authority figure is a turn-off to many people.
- Avoid judgmental words such as *lazy*, *unreasonable* and *uncooperative*. By sticking to facts rather than descriptions,

the conversation is likely to stay on track and be unemotional.

- Beware of unspoken messages. If I yell, “Can’t you *ever* get this done on time?” the unspoken message is, “Can’t you ever get this done on time (*you idiot*)? Such messages come across loud and clear!

These suggestions are not just for managers who want to enhance the effectiveness of direct reports. These techniques can be applied when your co-worker leaves a mess in the microwave, your office-mate doesn’t return your supplies, or your boss is micro-managing your every move. However, in any of these cases, timing will be important. Negative feedback is most effective when delivered ***calmly and privately***; your timing, tone of voice, and use of body language can speak even more loudly than your words. Please don’t forget that!

So when giving feedback, focus on what’s important: opening communication, not closing it. And to accomplish that end, be tough on problems, not on people. ●

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