



Making Feedback a Way of Life

Feedback is an issue that typically comes up when you're thinking about performance evaluation or coaching needs. When somebody isn't working up to the level you expect, you give them feedback—you tell them what you see they're doing wrong, hopefully in a way that enables a course correction and improvement.

That's not the only kind of feedback that's important on the job, though. Feedback is a vital part of communication. You give feedback, both negative and positive, to your employees and staff. They also give feedback to you. Feedback is exchanged every day in your dealings with your boss and your colleagues, with vendors, with your customers and clients.

What can you do to make this feedback effective, so it leads to beneficial results?

Be Cool

- **Don't give feedback when you are emotionally "hot."** When you are angry, or upset, or in the grip of any other strong feeling, your emotions are likely to distort your perceptions, and also to make you express yourself in more extreme terms than you should. Give yourself time to cool down and think things through rationally before you say anything you may regret later.

Be Open

- **Recognize your perception is yours.** Two people never see the

same thing in the same way in any case, and the more emotionally charged the issue, the greater the divergence of perception is likely to be. Don't be surprised if the other person resists or questions your interpretation.

- **Open a dialog.** The feedback you offer should be just the beginning of the discussion. Be open-minded and flexible. The other person's perspective may be just as valid as yours.
- **Clear the air.** For many people, because of personality or organization culture, it is more important to "get along" and maintain the appearance of harmony than to challenge someone else's ideas or activities. If the smooth surface is the result of suppressing disagreement, however, the ultimate result is likely to be poisoned relationships, distrust and dysfunction, and bottom-line trouble. Even if keeping quiet in public is politically prudent, it is often beneficial to find some safe forum to convey your perspective and resolve differences before it's too late.

Be Timely

Feedback, unlike wine, ages poorly. The best time to give feedback is right away, or as close to it as possible.

Why give immediate feedback?

- **Memories are short and unreliable.** The longer you wait after the event you are responding to, the more likely

it is that neither you nor the other person will have perfect recall of exactly what happened, or the context. If something is kept on file for eleven and a half months and only brought up at the annual review, people are likely to have forgotten the details, even the whole incident. Delay can challenge memory even on a shorter timeframe, particularly if an incident has emotional significance for one or the other person.

- **Timely feedback enables timely response.** One of the major goals of feedback is to induce a change in the other person's behavior or attitudes. If you don't let them know promptly what you think, it may be too late. If someone tells you about a plan you think is a bad idea, sharing your reaction may get them to reconsider and avoid a mistake. If you observe someone acting in a way that may lead to unwanted results, explaining the potential problem to them can lead to their correcting things before they get too bad. Equally, if you observe behavior you like—tell them so, and encourage repetition.

