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# A brief guide to effective feedback



# Why bother with feedback?

Do you want to know how well you're doing your job? If your answer is 'yes', you will need to get feedback, often. Rather than waiting for the traditional annual appraisal several employers, such as Netflix<sup>1</sup> and Adobe, are moving to managing performance by adopting regular feedback conversations. If you manage people (or want to), you'll need to give them feedback - and they'll give you feedback too. Yet, we can dither and dodge about feedback. Why is that?

When I deliver training workshops on effective feedback, there might be a one or two people who'll say they perceive the whole thing a waste of time (pity), others who find feedback can be a bit #awks. Over time, I discovered that many people - especially the Brits in the room - had found the whole topic of feedback too daunting to get started.

<sup>1</sup>[Ditch Annual Performance Reviews. Here's How Netflix Did It.](#) Corporate Rebels, 2019

Seeing straight-A clever participants make such hard work of feedback inspired me to make feedback straightforward. I wrote a book about how to handle feedback in the workplace, whether giving or getting it, for people who want to see people do their best work.

So if that's what you want, you're in the right place. Feedback can be simple, worthwhile and motivational - when it's done right.

Use this guide to reflect on your experiences of feedback (get a pen and paper to make notes - now would be good), capture your thoughts and ideas and set the steps you'll take to make feedback an essential tool for how you work with colleagues.

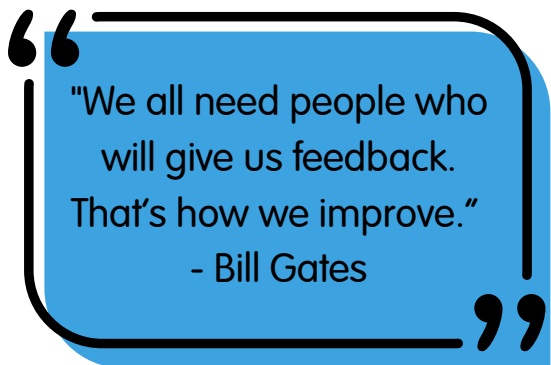


# How do you feel about feedback?

Complete the following sentences:

- When my manager says 'I need to give you some feedback', I feel.....
- When a colleague asks me to give them some feedback on how they're doing, I feel.....

Make sure you're using words that identify the emotions you feel, e.g. curious, optimistic, scared, excited, apprehensive, enthusiastic, pessimistic, intrigued, worried, eager, grateful.



# Reflect on your experience of feedback

Think of a time when you gave positive feedback to a colleague about a task they'd done well.

How did the conversation go? What thoughts did you have before, during and afterwards?

Now, think of a time when you gave feedback to a colleague who needed to correct course. How did that conversation go? What thoughts did you have before, during and afterwards?



Now, note your thoughts in those situations; what was going on in your head? Were you thinking, 'what have I done now?' Or were you thinking, 'I need to know how I'm doing - and how I can do better.' Or something else? Your notes of your feelings and thoughts will give you clues about your experience of feedback and its impact on you.

For example, if the feedback has been constructive, you might have felt pleased and proud and had positive thoughts about feedback or you might have felt reassured that you didn't have to wait until your next appraisal to find out how you're doing at work. Maybe you thought you were making good progress.



If the feedback was critical, you may have felt disappointed or annoyed - or grateful to learn where you'd been going wrong. You might have thought about what you would do differently next time.

Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings about feedback as you give and get it, with colleagues, friends, and others in your network.



# What stops you giving feedback?

Here are some of the answers to that question, given by workshop participants:

- "I don't want to criticise someone, they're trying really hard."
- "They'll get upset."
- "They'll think I'm a nasty manager."
- "They'll think I'm a creep giving them good feedback - 'who do they think they are?'"

Are any of these true for you? If you give clear, actionable feedback on a regular basis, your colleagues will know what they're doing well and what they can develop and do better.

Welcome to your job.



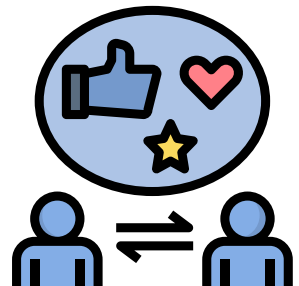


# Giving feedback

This conversation - and it is a two-way conversation - may be as simple as showing you've noticed and saying so. Just say what you have seen and heard as someone did their job.

## Get the grammar right

When giving feedback, it's essential to pinpoint the behaviour - which means verbs. I advise people to give their feedback 'the impartial observer test' - would an impartial, observant person agree with your feedback?



“You were credible” doesn’t identify the behaviour; only the speaker’s opinion of it. Whereas “You used evidence to back up your recommendations” pinpoints the behaviour that the recipient did to earn the positive feedback. Therefore it passes the impartial observer test.

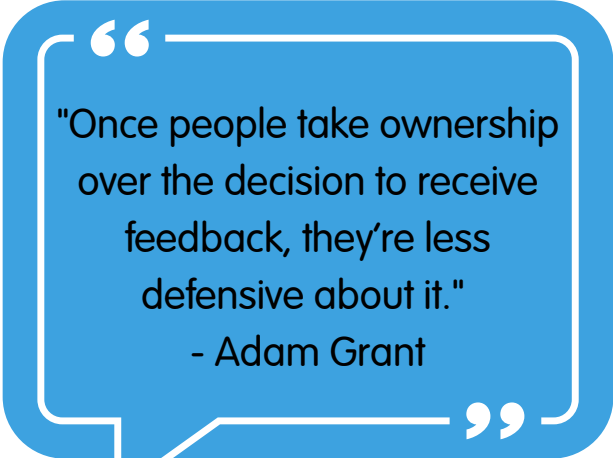
What about “You were aggressive”? This could come over as judgemental and may not pass the impartial observer test, whereas “You interrupted the client” is unambiguous and will pass the test.

Find more verbs to in ‘Giving actionable feedback needs action words’.

## Little and often

Feedback given well is a gift: it benefits the recipient. It's not a lecture, a judgement or a rant. If anything, good feedback is brief - and absolutely clear.

Yes, there are times when feedback is more formal, e.g. in appraisals or performance conversations, or at the end of a project. However, feedback can be most valuable when given in the flow of work.



“Once people take ownership over the decision to receive feedback, they're less defensive about it.”

- Adam Grant

Think of how you feel when someone you respect notices what you've done and immediately comments positively on it.

Think too of a time when someone you respect pulled you up on an unhelpful habit (such as interrupting colleagues in meetings).

Note: I believe all effective feedback is constructive. So I use 'positive' feedback, which is self-explanatory. However, its opposite, 'negative' can damage the recipient's self-esteem. So I prefer 'corrective' as the aim here is to help someone correct course. Our feedback must be built on a belief that we can all learn, develop and progress.

# Good feedback is a gift

If the feedback we get and give to others is clear, behavioural and actionable (meaning the recipient knows what they'd be wise to do more/less of), it's a gift to those who receive it.



“We encourage our people to build their ideas from scratch, and we give them the resources - and, crucially, the candid feedback - that are required to transform the first wisps of a story into a truly compelling film.”  
- Edwin Catmull

# Getting feedback

How do you feel when a colleague says, “I’d like to give you some feedback...”? Wary and worried, or curious and constructive? Remember that clear, constructive feedback, is a gift to the recipient. How will you receive this gift?

When someone gives you feedback, make sure you’re crystal-clear about the behaviour that prompted the feedback (whether it’s positive or corrective).



It's vital to stay grounded in the here and now; tune out any unhelpful internal dialogue and listen very attentively. What are they saying - and how are they saying it? Take careful notes, especially if the feedback is detailed. Note the actual words, not your inferences.



“We cannot change what we are not aware of, and once we are aware, we cannot help but change.”  
- Sheryl Sandberg

## Get clear on the behaviour

Again, we're looking to pass the impartial observer test, so calmly ask questions to gain clarity.

For example:

"What did I say or do that's prompted your feedback?"

"Can you tell me more?"

"What impact did that have?"

## Suggest next steps

Keep it conversational; put your suggestions forward, e.g "How about I...?" or "What if I did [new behaviour] differently next time"?





## Follow up with your feedback giver

It may be as short and sweet as “Thanks, I’m glad you’ve noticed; I’ll work on that.”

Thank the person who gave you the initial feedback, there and then. Later, if your new, improved behaviour is getting good results, update the person who gave you the feedback.

## Get the feedback habit

When we make giving and getting feedback a habit, it’s not such a big deal any more - it’s part of our repertoire of ways to develop and be better at our work. Wondering who you can ask for feedback? [Here’s an A-Z!](#)





# Points to watch out for

## 1. Beware of your biases

So far, so common sense... However, us humans don't always behave sensibly. We have biases... For example, recent research reported in Harvard Business Review, showed how gender bias showed up when leaders were asked to provide feedback and advice to high-potential employees. The suggestions were different, according to whether the advice was for a female or male leader.



<sup>2</sup> [Harvard Business Review - 'Research: Men Get More Actionable Feedback Than Women' by Elena Doldor, Madeleine Wyatt, and Jo Silvester, February 10, 2021](#)

Note: some of us are more drawn to 'what's working well', while others are more at home with 'what needs fixing'. Notice how your preference (bias) shows up in feedback you give to others and your own responses to the feedback you're given.

Find out more in '[Giving feedback? Watch out for your biases...](#)'

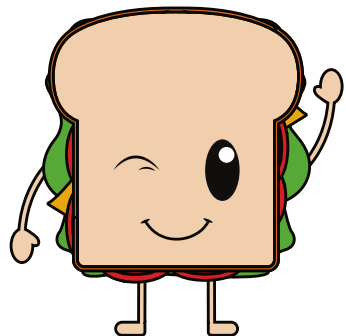


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"When we make progress and get better at something, it is inherently motivating. In order for people to make progress, they have to get feedback and information on how they're doing."  
- Daniel H. Pink  
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## 2. Stay away from sandwiches...

If I had a pound for every time a participant in a training workshop has said, "I'm a big fan of the S\*\*t sandwich approach to feedback", I'd have even more shoes in the wardrobe. In case you've not encountered this very unsavoury snack, it's when, let's say a manager:

- Tells a team member what they've done well lately or are good at (bread being 'battered up')
- Follows up with something they've not done so well (add evil-smelling sandwich filling), and finally
- Slaps another slice of bread on top ('to end well').



My take on sandwiches can be guessed from the chapter in The Feedback Book, entitled 'Don't feed clever people stupid sandwiches'. By all means, buy the book; but for now, see "What's wrong with a 'feedback sandwich'?"

Time to get started! Any questions? Please get in touch via [dawn@zoomly.co.uk](mailto:dawn@zoomly.co.uk).



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