

Giving feedback

Introduction

Feedback is helpful information given to someone to help them recognise and improve their performance. Feedback can provide a 'reality check', confirming or challenging the individual's own assessment. It presents them with opportunities to change or improve. Despite these gains, many of us find the prospect of giving feedback uncomfortable, and this can be off-putting. Some basic rules for giving and receiving feedback can help make the experience positive and useful.

Do not avoid giving feedback. If you do, you will have very little credibility as a manager. And do not forget to give positive feedback for a job well done, or to just say 'thank you' at the end of a difficult day/week. Above all, if you give feedback, ask for it in return. Create an environment where giving and receiving feedback that is well-intentioned and helpful is the norm.

What to do

Many people get little or no feedback at work. As a result, they can only assume that what they are doing is fine or 'good enough'. If things are not going right and they do not know about it, you are responsible.

1. To make the feedback effective, follow the CRIMSON guidelines:

- C** make it **constructive**. It's meant to help and should be given with good intentions and without anger or sarcasm.
- R** be **realistic**. It should relate to work and focus on a behaviour they can change.
- I** give it **in good time**. Don't wait days or weeks.
- M** make it **manageable**. Don't give too much. If someone has made multiple mistakes, focus on the main ones.
- S** be **specific**. The feedback should be about specific behaviour. Be factual. Exactly what are you talking about? How many errors or what kind? Do not generalise or exaggerate. Avoid interpretation, such as 'I noticed you were late this morning. You obviously don't care much about your work ...'
- O** **own** the feedback. Say 'I' not 'we' or 'they' or 'the department'. Be honest. Say 'I have noticed ...' or 'I feel ...'.
- N** be **non-judgemental**. Don't make it personal. It is about a behaviour or event that wasn't quite as you'd like it. It is not a statement about the person's value or capability. It is 'you did this', not 'you are this'.

CRIMSON provides the guidelines. Let's now provide a structure for your feedback.

2. Use the EEC structure for feedback.

- E** give an **exact example**. Be specific about what you want to discuss. What exactly is the problem or behaviour that went wrong?
- E** **explain the effect**. Why does it matter? It could be that 'why something matters' is obvious, but not always.
- C** what do you want to see **change or continue**? Are you asking for more of the same or something new or different?

It is often better to ask the individual to suggest how to make a change. If they suggest it, they are more likely to stick to it. Let's look at an example of EEC in action ...

Here's an example of a non-EEC approach followed by a more 'EEC' approach:

"Jo, thanks for getting the report to me on time. That was good. However, I noticed a whole load of typos on the first few pages. Dozens and dozens of them. You need to be more careful, OK?"

This seems like feedback, but it fails the CRIMSON test and it doesn't follow EEC. And the manager used the dreaded word 'however' when moving from giving praise to pointing out an area that needs some work. The words 'However' and 'But' used in this way have the effect of wiping out the good things that we may have said at the beginning. Let's try again, using our guidelines:

"Thanks for getting the report to me on time. It looks like you've covered all the points that I asked you to include and the diagrams are really helpful ... I noticed 22 typos on the first few pages, so we need to look at that given that this report goes to our Steering Committee and I want them to think well of us and you. What do you think happened? ..."

In this way, the feedback becomes a more honest exploration of what went wrong or what could be improved. It is not an inquisition or blame game.

3. Listen to and handle any comeback.

We all come to work to do a decent job. None of us deliberately wants to get it wrong. But we all do get things wrong occasionally. Some people react badly to feedback that they see as critical of them. Why? Because they care. They care about what they do and how they are seen. So, it is not surprising that some people feel stung by feedback that seems to suggest they are not performing up to standard.

If this happens – perhaps they may contest the facts or respond angrily or even cry – make sure you listen.

Really listen. Keep your voice low and soothing and acknowledge their hurt. "I can see this has upset you."

Offer time out if you feel they need it and pick up again later or the next day.

Do not be drawn into argument. If they deny the facts or seek to create a diversion by attacking you or someone else, restate your evidence and suggest they focus on what they can do differently. If necessary, call time out for reflection, but follow up as soon as possible. Most people will accept critical feedback if it is phrased well, is accurate and is well-intentioned, but some need time to digest it.

4. Follow up.

Feedback is not hit-and-run. Check that the improvement or change has taken place and say 'well done' or 'thanks' to reinforce that you have noticed the improvement.

5. Seek feedback.

We said earlier that feedback should be two-way; if you give it, you should ask for it. Some people may be reluctant to give 'the boss' feedback. If so, try asking simple questions such as, 'Is there anything I can do to improve how I manage you?' 'Is there anything I don't do that you would find helpful?' and 'Is there anything I do that doesn't work for you and you'd like me to stop or do differently?' This encourages staff to offer ideas and highlights that feedback is 'just what we do around here'.

You could also make feedback a topic for a team meeting and gather ideas on what works well and what doesn't for your team.

Further resources

Useful links

- This website has some useful insights into how people feel when they get critical feedback and [how to deliver feedback](#) that works.
- Shari Harley is an American consultant who focuses on how to be candid at work. This [video gives a short introduction](#) to her approach to tackling difficult feedback.
- The [Feedback conversations workshop](#) can provide more insights and the chance to practice.
- Related guides from this series: [Managing poor performance](#); [Difficult conversations](#); [Understanding performance](#); [One-to-ones](#)

About this guide

This guide has been developed for staff who have recently taken on the responsibility of managing other staff members. Guides were produced to cover key topics to induct, guide and support managers through key areas of responsibility. These guides are intended to be 'living documents' and will be re-released over time. Please get in touch with feedback and suggestions: pod@admin.ox.ac.uk