MAKING FEEDBACK HELPFUL*

Larry K. Michaelsen (University of Oklahoma)
Emily E. Schultheiss (Westinghouse Electric Company)

In every aspect of our lives, we are constantly faced with the need to tell others—family, friends, associates, bosses, subordinates—about the effects of their behavior. Often, the goal of such feedback is to be helpful—that is either to encourage them to reinforce positive behavior or to eliminate behavior that is detrimental to them, to us or to our relationship. Unfortunately, not all feedback is helpful. If it is given at the wrong time or in an inappropriate way, it can be destructive to the recipient, your relationship with them or both.

In our view, giving feedback effectively is a skill that comes naturally to a few but can be learned by anyone if they are willing to focus on two things. The most important of which is asking themselves, "Why do I want to give this feedback?" If the intent is to let off steam or establish who's in charge, then the outcome is likely to be negative and the feedback probably shouldn't be given at all. If the intent is to help the other person improve themselves or strengthen your relationship with them then the second factor comes into play. This one has to do with the manner in which the feedback is given. Even when the intent is positive, the outcome is likely to be negative unless the process is handled skillfully. The following characteristics of helpful feedback should assist in this regard.

Helpful Feedback is Descriptive NOT Evaluative

Evaluative words, especially negative ones (e.g., "wrong," "bad," etc.) are likely to cause a defensive reaction even when the person already knows they have made a mistake. For example, telling someone that they have made a "careless" mistake is likely to elicit an excuse that places the blame, and therefore the need for change, on someone else (e.g., "They don't give me enough time to do the job right."). On the other hand, simply describing the consequences of their actions (e.g., "Joe was upset when his order didn't arrive on schedule.").

Feedback is more descriptive and less evaluative when you "own" it by clearly labeling it as an opinion). For example, an un-owned "That's wrong" is a direct pronouncement of the inadequacy of the receiver's position and the instinctive response would be to defend themselves by reinforcing the merits of their point of view rather than examining the givers' views. By contrast, "owned" statements such as "I disagree," and even "I think you're wrong," are more likely to prompt further discussion because they describe the giver's position and, as a result, are invitations to compare points of view. Thus, it would be much more helpful to say "I was angry (surprised, upset or whatever) that you disagreed with me in the meeting. I thought you'd have been more supportive based on our discussion at lunch," than to say "You were being twofaced when you disagreed with me in the meeting," even though both statements clearly provide feedback about your displeasure.

Helpful Feedback is Specific

The more specific the feedback, the more information it contains. In trying to help someone learn how to type, say "you are using the correct finger on all but two of the letters of the alphabet" would be descriptive and minimally evaluative but not specific enough to be of much help. "You are striking the Y and the N with the left instead of the right forefinger," would be even less likely to be seen as evaluative and would be specific enough to be useful. Similarly, the statement "I saw your interactions with me in this group as being quite brief so that I didn't really understand what you were trying to say," is descriptive, non-evaluative, and owned by the giver but is also fare more general (and proportionately less helpful) than the statement "…I had a hard time understanding your point about Bill's next assignment. I think my problem was that I didn't have enough information to tie things together."

Helpful Feedback is Honest and Sincere

Fear of eliciting a negative reaction often prompts us to "sugar coat" feedback in one of two ways. One is starting with a complement intended "soften-up" the receiver. Thus, for example (even though we think it's a *bad* idea) we might say, "That's a good idea, but…" in hopes that the receiver will be receptive to what follows the "but." Unfortunately, doing so creates the impression that things are OK when they really aren't and when the truth comes out (and it almost always will), the receiver: a) often loses confidence in the sender's credibility and, b) sometimes reacts even more negatively because he or she feels they have been misled. We recommend, giving the descriptive negative feedback first (e.g. I'm still concerned about…"), *followed by* the praise (e.g. "On the other hand, I agree with/liked…). That way, you can get your point across and, at the same time, actually *increase* the credibility of the feedback. The second way we try to "sugar coat" negative feedback is by "beating around the bush" by adding a lot of unnecessary verbiage. The problem with this approach is that the feedback often comes across as insincere because it sounds rehearsed. Thus, you should get right to the point (NO extra words) and use *every-day* language (i.e., normal for you and appropriate to the setting).

Helpful Feedback is Expressed in Terms Relevant to the Receiver's Needs

Even though a particular behavior is highly undesirable from your point of view, your feedback is likely to be ignored unless it is given in terms that are important to the recipient. For example, depending on *their* needs, telling a subordinate, a peer, or even a boss that "I thought the way your treated Susan was unprofessional," might have a dramatically different effect than asking "Were

your aware that Susan was so upset she was in tears and is thinking of quitting because she feels you were too critical of her?" Some might respond because they are concerned about maintaining their "image" and feel that Susan's reaction was her problem. Others might not care about their own "image" but be highly responsive because of Susan's reaction. The key is that we are more likely to respond to feedback that is stated in terms of issues that we have strong feelings about.

Helpful Feedback is Timely

In general, the more immediate the feedback; the more helpful it will be. In part, this is because immediate feedback tends to be much more specific since the details of the situation are more apparent than they would be at any later point in time. In addition, delayed feedback often causes resentment because it may sound like a 'Monday morning quarterback." This is because the recipient may feel that he or she could have minimized problems by making on-the-spot corrections if you had spoken up earlier.

Even though immediate feedback is generally desirable, one caution is in order. There may be situations in which the receiver's needs may make it necessary to postpone feedback until it can be given a different setting. For example, bosses who need to be seen as being "in charge" will invariably respond defensively when anyone attempts to give them negative feedback in any kind of a public setting even though they often respond favorably to a "one-on-one" conversation at a later point in time. Similarly, someone who is very upset or angry is not likely to be open to feedback until they have had the opportunity to calm down.

Helpful Feedback is Desired by the Receiver

One of the most critical aspects of giving feedback is being able to tell when those who need it are ready to receive it. In part, this is because imposing feedback on someone who isn't ready for it is more likely to damage your relationship with the recipient than to provide him or her with helpful insights. This, two important questions arise: (1) How can you tell whether or not someone is ready to receive feedback and, (2) What, if anything, can you do when you think someone needs feedback and doesn't appear to be aware that they need it?

With respect to the first question, a number of things can help. Most people give both nonverbal and verbal cues. For example, both body position (turned away) and such things as attempting to redirect the conversation are warnings about giving negative feedback. The better you know the person, the easier it is to read their cues particularly when they trust you enough so that they don't feel like they need to be "on guard" in your presence.

Unfortunately, having a close relationship with someone often leads us to assume that our feedback will be more welcome than it turns out to be. As a result, the only time you can be sure that it is "safe" to give negative feedback is when the recipient specifically asks for it.

What can you do when you feel that someone would benefit from feedback but doesn't appear to be aware that they need it? One key is patience. In many cases simply waiting for an invitation for your input will provide plenty of opportunities. In situations in which waiting is too costly, the best option is to ask the person if they would like you to give them feedback. However, if they express *any* hesitancy, you should attempt to understand and resolve the reasons for their reservations before actually moving ahead with the feedback.

Helpful Feedback is Usable

Feedback is useful only when it relates to something over which the person has control. Feedback is useless when it is about: (1) personal attributes such as race, sex, age, physical size or even previous experience and, (2) opportunities that have already been missed (i.e., something someone should have done but didn't). The problem with both is that the person can't do anything about them even if they want to. As a result, giving feedback based on these kinds of issues is not only useless but is likely to cause resentment (or worse).

Summary

We have outlined seven variables that determine whether or not feedback will be helpful on one hand or ineffective and possibly even harmful on the other. Our comments can be summed up in the following six "Characteristics of Helpful Feedback." Helpful Feedback is:

(1) **Descriptive**, not evaluative, **and is "owned" by the sender.**

(2) **Specific**, not general.

(3) **Honest and sincere.**

(4) **Expressed in terms relevant to the self-perceived needs of the receiver.**

(5) **Timely and in context.**

(6) **Desired by the receiver**, not imposed on him or her.

(7) **Usable; concerned with behavior over which the receiver has control.**

A Concluding Note

One final general rule concerns the communications process itself. Feedback cannot be helpful if it is not heard or is misunderstood. Thus, it is always a good idea for the person giving feedback to check, explicitly, with the receiver, to make sure that the receiver heard and understood what you were trying to communicate. One of the most effective ways of accomplishing this is by asking the receiver to restate what he or she thought you have said.