

[Feedback](#)

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[Video of Justin Kan \(Twitch, Atrium\) talking about giving and receiving feedback \(5 min\)](#)

Receiving

Frequent, transparent feedback is critical for building a strong culture and a thriving business. Feedback is instrumental in building trust. Without trust, communication breaks down. Building a culture of feedback and transparency starts and ends with the founders.

Critical feedback, in particular, should be cherished. Your team members are in the trenches every day. They have knowledge about the company that you do not have. Only if you open up the door to negative feedback will your team feel comfortable giving it.

Think about it from the other side—it can be quite scary to criticize someone who has power over them. They might feel they're risking their job!

If you do not proactively collect feedback, you will quickly find the following problems emerge:

- **You will be in the dark about your company's problems:** If you act defensively every time your team brings up an issue, they will soon stop bringing that valuable information to you, and you will wither away in your ivory tower.
- **Operations will grind to a halt:** When people cannot share things openly, communication breaks down; when communication breaks down, operations slow. This problem only gets worse as your company grows, and as it grows, it becomes even harder to change that culture.
- **Your best talent will leave you:** A-players have no patience for defensiveness and amateurishness. If you aren't mature enough to listen to your people, face your problems, and work on fixing them, your A-players will find the founders who listen.

Therefore, if you are to receive real, honest feedback and improve and keep your team communicating, YOU must make an effort to seek it out. Do so using the five A's:

1. **Ask for it:** Make sure your team understands that giving you negative feedback will not be punished but cherished. It is essential to say this, preferably in a one-on-one setting. When asking for feedback on the company in general, it is helpful to ask, "If you were CEO, what would you change?" You can do this in person or through an anonymous survey.

When asking for feedback about himself as a manager, Lachy Groom, formerly of Stripe, asks, "What feedback are you afraid to give because you think it will hurt my feelings? Please tell me that." Even then, many people hesitate. I like to add, "Don't tell me. Please think about it. Do you have it in your brain chamber? Yes? Now please tell me."

Let your reports know that until they share truly negative feedback with you, you will think that they are simply withholding, and you won't be able to trust them fully.

Note: It is not enough to say, "Give me feedback anytime." None of your reports will ever actually create the time and space to do this. Instead, you must create this time and space. I do so in the last 5-10 minutes of every meeting I am in, whether 1-1 or team meeting. And I do it in writing (I ask each participant to write down their feedback to me in real-time in our shared Doc) so that I can refer back to it forever. I recommend that you do the same.

Many meeting owners send a survey after the meeting asking for feedback. Please recognize that this is close to useless. People will not carve out the time to do so. And will not be motivated to give honest feedback as they have no idea if it will be read or understood.

2. Acknowledge it. Confirm that you heard it correctly by saying, **"I think I heard you say ..."** Summarize what they said or wrote. Then say, **"Is that right?"** If they say **"Yes,"** you can proceed. If they say **"Not quite,"** ask them to repeat it until you can summarize it correctly. Once you have correctly summarized what they said, you can even go deeper by asking, **"Is there more?"**

If you want to go to the advanced level, also describe the emotions they are experiencing. Do this by feeling the feeling yourself and expressing the thoughts in your head if you were in their situation. Go big here. Exaggerate the thoughts. Use swear words. Remember that they are fearful that if they say what they think, you will get angry (and then become vindictive). So they have toned down their thought when saying it. If you tone it down even more, they will not feel heard. But, by contrast, if you amp it up, they will likely say, "Well, it's not that extreme." But they will feel heard. And they will be safe seeing that even though you thought they were saying the amp-up version, you didn't get angry.

Example:

1. What was said or written:
 1. *"I wish that you wouldn't act in anger."*
2. What is likely in their head:
 1. *"Goddammit, why do you always have to be such an f-ing bully? Let people talk and at least have the courtesy to not rage at the ones who are telling you what you need to hear while the others cower in silence!"*

This action is the single most powerful tool that I know of to create trust and connection. People want to feel heard. And they can only know that you heard them if you say back their words (or, even better, their thoughts) to them. Oddly, this step is more impactful than acting on their feedback.

To confirm that you have done this correctly, ask the person: **"Do you feel heard?"**

3. Appreciate it. Simply say **"Thank you"** for the precious gift that your colleague is giving you. Don't make excuses. Don't argue back. Just say, "Thank you."

4. Accept it (or not). Declare whether or not you accept it. You do not have to accept the feedback. You just need to declare whether or not you accept it. There may well be feedback that you do not take (i.e., that you disagree with philosophically). If so, explain why. If you do accept it, however, then ...

5. **Act on it.** Co-create an action item that will effectively address the feedback. Put a due date on it. Do it. And then let the feedback-giver know that you did the action. When you do, you will have completed the feedback loop. And the feedback-giver will then have gained trust that you want feedback and are committed to improving. Publish this feedback and action item widely to the organization. Only then will your team members feel confident that you hear their voices and safe enough to give you further feedback.

Giving

First, when giving feedback, it is critical to use a two-way communication method (in person is best, a video call is okay, an audio call is least good). This method is so that you can see the person's reaction. If they get defensive and angry, you will be able to see that and say: "I didn't intend to make you feel angry. I intended to be helpful." This step will hopefully mollify their anger.

If, on the other hand, you use a one-way communication method (email, text, voicemail), then the recipient can quickly become defensive and angry without you realizing it. And because you don't notice the anger, you won't be able to address it. Unaddressed, that anger will soon turn into resentment towards you. Therefore, **do NOT use a one-way communication method (email, text, voicemail) to give feedback unless it is 100% positive.** There is one exception to this rule: If you already know (without a doubt) the person to be open, curious, and desirous of critical feedback.

Second, it is critical to always affirm the positive value of the relationship (i.e., "I value you because you ..." or "I like that you did"). Yes, every time you give someone feedback.

Third, before giving critical feedback, write it down first (on a doc only you have access to). Why? Because in the moment, it is often challenging to give clear critical feedback. We feel fear, our brain tells us to withhold (after all, we like this person and don't want to hurt their feelings), and then we often can't get the message across fully or clearly.

Fourth, phase in the way that you give critical feedback. In the first few meetings where you give critical feedback (after you have affirmed the relationship), give it verbally (i.e., read your notes). As you give feedback, watch the person. If you see that they become tense or get triggered ... stop. Reassure them that your intent is not to criticize or attack. Rather you value them and want them to succeed to their fullest potential. Do not continue until they release their fear or anger (which can take a few days).

Once a person can appreciate verbal feedback, then in the next few meetings where you deliver critical feedback, copy/paste your feedback into a shared doc during the session and have them read it in front of you. Watch the person as they do. If they get triggered, stop them and reassure them that your feedback is intended as a gift.

Once the person can appreciate written feedback, you can move on to giving them feedback asynchronously. But know that this is a dangerous step. If they ever get triggered, you won't be able to see it and reassure them of your positive intent. Personally, I never share critical feedback asynchronously, no matter how open someone is.

There are three levels of feedback that you can give:

1. Relative
2. Absolute
3. Deep (emotion-based)

Relative Feedback

This step is simple feedback that allows the recipient to improve from whatever their position.

Here is the template:

1. Like. "I like that you did ..." This should be an action that occurred, not a generic character trait.
 1. Good example: "You said hello to me when I walked in the door yesterday."
 2. Bad example: "You are nice."
2. Wish That. "I wish that you would do...." Again, this should be a specific positive action.
 1. Good example: "Say goodbye to me whenever you leave the room."
 2. Bad example: "Don't be rude."

Absolute Feedback

People also need to know where they stand on an absolute basis. Do not wait until year-end Performance Reviews. Most people have constant anxiety when they aren't sure where they stand. Giving absolute feedback regularly (usually monthly in a 1-1) will eliminate this anxiety. The bad news is less anxiety-inducing than no news.

To give it, state:

1. Your current rating for your job function, 1-5, is ...
 - 4-5 is above expectation
 - 3 is at expectation, and you can outperform by following *next level* guidance.
 - 2 is below expectation, and you can quickly improve with *next level* guidance.
 - 1 is far below expectation. I am now putting you on a written 30-day Performance Improvement Plan.
2. What you did that I liked is ...
3. What you need to do to get to the next level is ...

Deep (emotions-based) Feedback

Finally, there is deep emotion-based feedback. Do this when there is more time (offsite).

Here is a template for providing this feedback, adapted from the book *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall B. Rosenberg.

1. Ask for permission. Give the receiver a little heads-up of what's coming. It can be enough to say
 - a. **"I have something to communicate to you, is now a good time?"**
2. Do you value this relationship? If yes, please state why.
 - a. **"I value this relationship because", or**
 - b. **"I feel joy when I see you"**
3. State your emotion in terms of anger, sadness, fear, joy, and excitement (**feeling**). This step is perhaps the most challenging part for you to do. Talking about your feelings might not be something you are used to, so it might be challenging at first. However, doing so is crucial for the other person to truly understand where you are coming from and take your feedback to heart. You may think, I'm not angry, I'm just frustrated. Well, that is just a lesser version of anger. Just as all colors are primarily red, yellow, and blue, all emotions are a version or mixture of the base emotions listed above.
 - a. **"I feel anger." |**
4. State the facts as you perceive them (**facts**). Be very careful to state only pure facts, as a video camera would record them. (This is a challenge for many people to do. Keep it very short. If it is hard for you, simply skip this step and go right to Story.) An example of not fact: "You disrespected me." An example of fact:
 - a. **"You walked in the door this morning, and I did not hear you say hello."**
5. Now, state the thoughts, opinions, and judgments (**Story**) you have around this situation.
 - a. **"The thought that I have is", or**
 - b. **"The story that I am telling myself is"**
6. If you want to go to the advanced level (see explanation in the next section below), describe what you did to create this situation.
 - a. **"I helped create this situation by"**
7. Request what you would like to see. Try to frame it as positive action ("do x") rather than a negative ("don't do y").
 - a. **"I request that you"**
8. Ask if the person accepts the feedback and the request. If yes, then hold them accountable for doing it.

Giving and receiving frequent and transparent feedback may be painful at first. Often when companies start implementing this, it brings up a lot of underlying resentment and repressed issues. However, if you hang in there, you will find that the amount and intensity of feedback diminish substantially, and your team will be noticeably happier and more productive.

The next level of giving feedback (whether Relative, Absolute, or Deep) is recognizing your part in creating the situation. If you view each issue as caused by others or things outside of you, you will feel and act like a victim and give away your power to create the world you want to live. Conversely, if you are willing to articulate how you helped create the situation, you take back

your control. You will more clearly see how you can change the current situation and prevent the situation from happening again in the future.

To do this, in Deep feedback, before making a request, state: **"I helped create this situation by"** Then write out (or say) all the steps needed to create this situation.

In conscious leadership terminology, we call this "taking 100% responsibility."

When you ask for feedback from someone for the first time, they may say, "I have no critical feedback for you; you're great." If so, then either they think you're perfect, or they are withholding from you. (Which one do you think it is?) In this case, you can supply the thought for them, and ask if you are close: **"I have a story in my head that you are feeling anger and the thought that you are having is 'Screw Jim, he never gives me clear written direction and then gets mad when things don't turn out the way that he had envisioned.' Is that close?"** This prompt will often get the person to say: "Yes, that's right." or "No, what I'm actually thinking is"

One of the most common issues that I hear from Managers of why they don't want to give transparent feedback:

"Person X on my team is not performing well. But there is no one else that can do their job. I plan to hire someone to replace X eventually. But in the meantime, if I give X real and honest feedback, I am afraid that they will quit, and then I'll be totally screwed."

This situation is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you do not give someone feedback, then, by definition, that person will fail.

If, however, you give feedback as a gift (using the script above), then the receiver will likely receive it well, and one of two magical things will happen:

- They will work hard to improve and perform the way that you hope, or
- They will admit that they cannot perform the job and actively help you find their replacement.

Withholding feedback is never the best answer!

A note on expressing feelings:

When you give clear feedback, the receiver may cry. This reaction is not a bad sign. For many people, crying is a very effective way of releasing emotion. Allow the person the space to cry. Be okay with it. Just breathe. Don't try to stop their crying or cut it off by talking to them or putting your hand on their shoulder. Instead, allow them to cry as long as they need to (rarely lasts more than 1-2 minutes). Once they finish, they will feel much better, and you can both proceed productively.

If we make it not okay to cry, then people have no way of releasing their emotions, and then that emotion becomes a bad mood.

Mathilde Colin from Front has written up [her advice on giving and receiving feedback](#). It is similar to what's written above, but there are valuable differences as well.

Question: "People tell me that I am too abrasive when I give feedback. How do I deliver feedback in a way that people are open to hearing it without feeling hurt?"

There have been several innovations in feedback delivery.

The first was to share positive feedback before sharing any negative feedback. "You did this thing really well. This other thing, however, was not good."

The second was sharing what to do, as opposed to what not to do. "The next time you do this action, please do it this way"

The third was to not state as judgments but rather share feelings, thoughts, and requests. "When you did ..., I felt frustrated," "The thought that I had was....," "My request is...."

Reed Hastings of Netflix has landed upon the latest (and IMHO best) iteration so far. When giving feedback, he does not act in anger, nor does he state how he feels. Instead, he says what he thinks needs to happen (positive example) and why it will lead to the company's success and the person's success (rather than Reed himself no longer feeling anger).

To me, therefore, best practice is

- State what the person is doing that you like
- State what other thing you would like to see the person do, in positive terms ("Please do this," not "Don't do that")
- Explain why this way of doing things will lead to the company and person's success