

Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback

Constructive feedback does not mean saying something nice before you say something harsh. Though this can soften a blow, it misses the deeper issues in giving feedback. While doing science and as part of mentor-mentee relationships, we have to critique and give/receive feedback often. Since this process can be quite painful, here are some guidelines that can help.

Goal & Mindset

Shared understanding

The goal of giving feedback is to achieve shared understanding. To achieve this goal, the feedback must be valuable, actionable, and understandable.

Mutual respect

The feedback has to come from a place of respect. Everyone is a decent person doing her or his best. Therefore, there can be no character indictment. We are more able to act on both positive and negative feedback if it comes from someone we respect, who we believe has our best interests at heart.

How can I help?

Coming in with a helpful mindset sets a good tone. Mentors and mentees ideally have the same overall goal – for the mentees to reach their full potential and succeed scientifically while working with the mentor and then to move on to satisfying positions elsewhere. Both of these goals serve both parties. Mentors need scientific productivity to maintain the lab. Mentees need experience creating scientific knowledge to earn their credentials and secure their next posts. Instead of considering what the other person can do for you, flip it around. What can you do to help them?

Open mind

Part of the social contract that goes into giving/receiving feedback is both parties to having an open mind. The receiver – taking this exercise as a growth opportunity – is responsible for seeking to understand and asking clarifying questions to developing their understanding. The giver's responsibility is to be open to their own understanding being wrong.

How To Do It

Be specific

Specific problems have specific solutions. Vague problems or dissatisfactions don't have solutions, and they invite frustration or commiseration. Being specific is also the easiest way to avoid character indictment. When you stay focussed on the specific issue, what might be motivating it, and how it can be resolved, you can avoid unproductive accusatory generalities such as "you always..." or "you never...". Even if you don't have a solution in mind, describing your issue as specifically as possible will allow others to help. A good way to make things specific is by using concrete examples of past situations.

Follow the "Keep, Discard, Improve" Rule

Giving constructive criticism is like editing: you need to define the stuff to keep (what's going well?), stuff to get rid of (what's not working at all?), and stuff to fix (what has some value but could be improved?). All of these components are critical. Focus only on the good and you lose the opportunity to improve. Focus only on the bad and you lose motivation. So, when it's our turn to give feedback, we will strive to say one-thing each to keep, discard, and improve.

Share impact

If you can't be clear why, you can't expect the receiver to gain understanding. It is your responsibility as a feedback giver to teach the receiver why the problem is a problem and explain the impact. If you don't understand the impact clearly, then you don't understand the problem enough to give feedback.

Check understanding and agree on resolution

Check the receiver's understanding of the feedback by asking them to explain in their own words. Asking for this can be tricky between peers or when the receiver is a senior person. Checking understanding can also be a part of agreeing on resolution, which involves asking the receiver to propose a solution/plan. Listening to their proposal will help greatly in checking their understanding of your feedback and give you an opportunity to step-in and fine-tune further. It is also critical to design a measurement to know the effectiveness of the final plan/solution.

The following tips are relevant to giving feedback in group settings.

Don't Pile On

When one person finds a weakness in an argument or spots an area for improvement, others often feel the need to form a chorus around it. But there's almost no value beyond the initial observation and pursuing it further only makes the presenter defensive. Once a point has been made, move on.

Ask Questions

Asking earnest questions – from the place of "Can you tell me more so that I understand better?" – is a great alternative to just poking holes for giving feedback. Good questions provide guidelines for what an acceptable solution might look like and lets the speaker fully own the solution. For e.g.:

1. Ask for better articulation of goals: For instance, instead of saying "I don't see the purpose of that analysis", ask "Can you talk a bit about what you meant to convey with this analysis?". It helps the presenter articulate their intentions and then see for themselves how their presentation might have fallen short. You can then tune your feedback based on that.
2. Ask for clarification: For instance, ask "Can you elaborate on the methods you have on slide 4?", and then say, "It would be helpful to put all that you just said on another slide."

Let the Speaker Speak

People go to a lot of effort to prepare content and it can be demoralizing to get derailed without being able to say everything they want to say. So, if the presenter is asked a question, they need to be given the opportunity to fully respond before more questions are raised. Interruptions leave people feeling powerless.

Just Message Pedantic Notes

Spotting typos on slides or correcting misspoken words are useful in cases when the presenter is practicing a talk to be given later elsewhere. In those cases, make a note of them and message the speaker on Slack. Typically, there would be no need to bring them up in the room unless you think there might be genuine confusion. Calling them out gives the impression you're hunting for mistakes rather than ways to help.

Don't Pontificate...

Exploring some tangential topic to satisfy our own intellectual curiosity does not have a place in the feedback process. During meetings, stay focused on the matter at hand. Make notes of your additional thoughts and we can all chat after the meeting.

... But Allow the Speaker Some Rope

No Pessimism. It's tempting to shut down what seem like obviously bad ideas. It's much more valuable to react with curiosity. If an idea is truly off the mark, it's an opportunity to identify and correct a deeper misunderstanding, which is valuable. Of course, it's equally likely that the mistake lies with you. This approach makes it possible for dialogue and a greater diversity of ideas to be entertained.

References

Based on two excellent sources:

1. [Vincent et al. 2015 Mol. Cell.](#)
2. [The P rules.](#)
3. [Building Better People: How to give real-time feedback that sticks](#)