

**Receiving and giving feedback. An actionable guide.**

**An actionable guide by Niklaus Gerber.**

**Course notes.**

For 2023 I decided to further work on my feedback and reflection skills. This will also mean spending more time working with my teams at Vorwerk and supporting, mentoring and role-modelling how a healthy feedback culture should look like. I reworked the training material that served me well in the last few years and decided to open-source it. You can access the slides at [www.feedback.niklausgerber.com](http://www.feedback.niklausgerber.com). If you would like to modify or expand my work, you will find the complete repository here [github.com/niklausgerber/feedback](https://github.com/niklausgerber/feedback).

*“Feedback is your relationship with the world and the world’s relationship with you; it’s how you impact others, for better or worse. So it’s all around you—the question is just whether you’re paying attention to it.” — Harvard Law School lecturer Sheila Heen, a co-leader of Harvard’s Negotiation Project and co-founder of Triad Consulting Group.*

### **A guiding principle:**

Skilled people make feedback a positive experience, leaving everyone feeling valued, even if the input itself is challenging. Remember: Feedback is about **what you do** and does **not** define **who you are**!

### **Why is receiving feedback so hard?**

Our brains are unique — there’s no doubting that. When it comes to feedback, however, they tend to be a little sensitive, thanks to something called negativity bias. Negative experiences tend to exert a more significant psychological impact than positive experiences of the same magnitude. This means that no matter how often you receive positive feedback about your work, it’s easier for you to remember that one time it wasn’t. Therefore, more time and effort are needed to reinforce the good parts.

*“Receiving feedback does not mean I am the worst person ever. It only means someone cares enough to tell me how to improve.” — The Power of Feedback, Joseph Folkman.*

## **Feedback is a gift.**

How are you picking a gift for your spouse or best friend?

- Thinking about what would be the right gift.
- Picking it.
- Wrapping it.
- Writing a thoughtful card.

To find the perfect gift, you need to care about the person, and you will put some effort into it. The same goes when it comes to feedback. Throwing over some comments while leaving a meeting is not helpful, nor will it help the other person to grow.

## **How to receive critical feedback.**

### **The five stages of receiving feedback.**

- **Discard:** “This has nothing to do with me.”
- **Defend:** “No, that’s not how it was”
- **Explain:** “Yes, but...”
- **Understand:** Listen, accept
- **Change, Reinforce, Remain:** Process the feedback and make my conscious choice.

## How might you approach this best?

### Step one: Don't react - respond.

Whether you're getting feedback informally (a passing comment in a hallway) or formally (an annual review), the most critical first step is to avoid deciding how meaningful it is to you at that moment. Unless you're a surgeon or a bomb defuser, it's scarce that "feedback is so critical that you need to act on it at the moment.

1. Start by **listening**.
2. Then, **clarify** your understanding of what the person is saying by asking for real-world examples.
3. Finally, **thank** the person, even if you don't like what they said.

In that moment of thanking that person, you recognise that they're human beings, which might have been an awkward thing for them to have said. You're not agreeing, not accepting the feedback, not taking it on board, but you're thanking the person for caring enough to speak up. It also helps you avoid overreacting, being defensive, or committing to some behaviour changes you might regret down the line.

Now that you've bought some time create some distance.

## **There are three key things to know about active listening.**

1. Empathetic understanding: I understand what you are saying, what you mean, and how you feel. The essential attitude of active listening is trying to see the world from the other person's eyes. You're trying to convey this to your conversational partner.
2. Listening is not agreeing: Listening to understand the other person's point of view. It doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with them. However, it makes it more possible to take it all in and then carefully share your viewpoint, even if it's completely different.
3. Be willing and ready to listen: No distractions. If you are distracted, it's best to be open and honest about it. Ask if you can postpone the conversation to another time or take a moment to get distractions out of your way. Pretending to listen is not only very impolite; it also runs contrary to active listening and, over time, can damage relationships.

*"Great communication isn't just about what you say; it's about what other people hear." — Dave Bailey*

## **Step two: Consider the feedback's value and context.**

Even if it's well-intentioned and valuable, feedback can be fraught. It could be inaccurate or tinged with overt or subconscious bias. So how do you decide if it's valuable?

1. Remember that feedback is only one facet of who you are.
2. Put the feedback in context to understand how productive it might be. For example, did you ask for or invite this feedback? Who gave it, and what is their relationship to your work? How did they provide the feedback—did you get a sense that it was thoughtful and genuinely well-meaning? Is it related to a moment or time, or is it ongoing? (The latter is more helpful). And, is it functional—about how you do something—or personal, about how you are?

**Being told you need to be different is not particularly helpful.** However, if the answers to these questions help you determine the feedback is pretty well-intentioned and potentially useful, then you can move on.

### **Step three: Corroborate and challenge.**

Collect data and information from trusted members of your “career community”. (colleagues, sponsors, mentors, peers, and so on). Ask them if they recognise this behaviour in you because then you are not thinking about changing off the back of a single person’s view. Different people from different backgrounds, who believe in different ways, or who approach who you are and who you are in the workplace differently could give you extra, precious lenses on precisely the same piece of feedback.

### **Step four: Turn the feedback into a goal.**

You can either do this step on your own or with the help of the person providing the feedback.

#### **Craft your objective by asking yourself:**

- What is the goal?
- What will change as a result of my having achieved it?
- What are the steps along the way?
- Who might I need support from?
- How will I measure my progress?
- How will I celebrate my progress when I get there?

Goals, by their nature, need to be achievable and have a structure or a plan attached. Otherwise, they’re just a dream, an idea, or a thought. This process means you’ve turned “the feedback” into something tangible and worked out what you need. Sometimes this is easy and can be done in a week. Sometimes this can take a while—for example, you don’t change your communication style overnight.

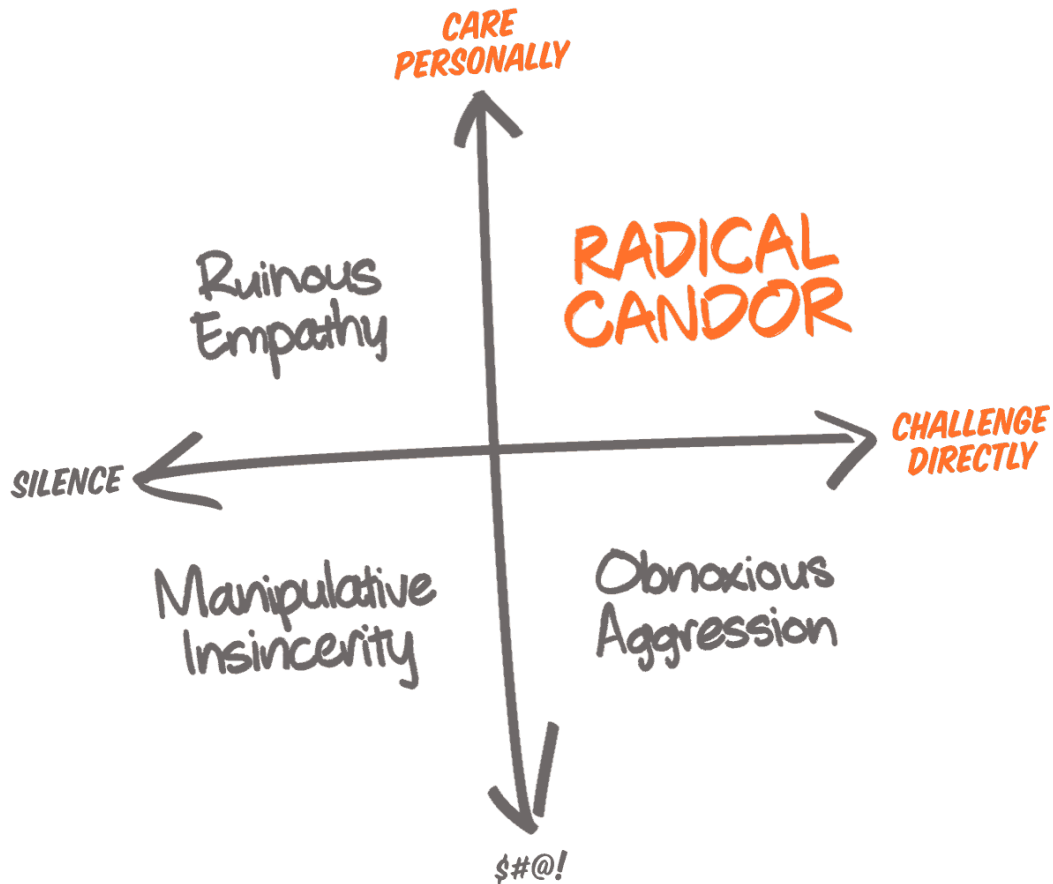
### **Step five: return to the source.**

- If you've determined the feedback was terrible or biased, you can stop there.
- Otherwise, return to the person who gave you feedback as a final step.
- Telling someone you're turning their feedback into a goal will help them learn what was valuable in the initial conversation and encourage them to keep helping others.
- This conversation can also bring that person more profound into your career community and help hold you accountable to your goals. What if you're not accepting the feedback? I still encourage you to return to the person to let them know (although she adds that how you decide to do so will depend on the context.) You might have chosen that the feedback is irrelevant or not a priority with other things going on. However, explaining your thoughts to the person recognises that feedback can be an ongoing conversation. It also lets them know their feedback was considered and they did a good thing.
- Everyone likes to have their input recognised. Bringing people back in allows you to recognise each other human to human. It makes it more likely that they will give feedback again.

*“We can’t just sit back and wait for feedback to be offered, particularly when we’re in a leadership role. If we want feedback to take root in the culture, we need to ask for it explicitly.” — Ed Batista, Coach & Lecturer.*

## How to give critical feedback

Care personally, and challenge directly.



**Obnoxious Aggression**, also called brutal honesty or front stabbing, happens when you challenge someone directly but don't show you care about them. It's praise that doesn't feel sincere or criticism and feedback that isn't delivered kindly.

**Ruinous Empathy** happens when you want to spare someone's short-term feelings, so you don't tell them something they need to know. You Care Personally but fail to Challenge Directly. It's praise that isn't specific enough to help the person understand what good or criticism is sugar-coated and unclear. Or simply silence. Ruinous Empathy may feel friendly or safe, but it is ultimately unhelpful and damaging. This is a feedback fail.



**Manipulative Insincerity** — backstabbing, political or passive-aggressive behaviour — happens when you neither Care Personally nor Challenge Directly. Instead, it's praise that is insincere, flattery to a person's face and harsh criticism behind their back. Often it's a self-protective reaction to Obnoxious Aggression. This is the worst kind of feedback failure.

**Radical Candor:** Since you learned to talk, you've likely been told, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Then you become the boss and the very thing you've been taught not to do since you were 18 months old is suddenly your job. To succeed, you have to Challenge Directly. Challenging people is often the best way to show you care. It does not mean that whatever you think is the truth, you share your (humble) opinions directly.

## **Setting the ground rules.**

- Speak from the "I". Speak from the "I", Eg "when this happens, I feel" It's your feeling; no one can argue with what you feel. Saying sentences like "you caused this" places blame on the individuals and can seem judgemental or aggressive. "I" helps you own your feedback. You cannot speak for others in the team as you cannot know or understand what they are feeling; that's for them to express.
- Don't tell people how to fix their problems. Instead, you'll foster more learning by asking questions that stimulate reflection and coaching people into exploration & experimentation. Again, it is about building empathy, not giving sympathy.
- No one wants a stinky fish. The stinky fish is a metaphor for "that thing that you carry around but don't like to talk about - but the longer you hide it, the stinkier it gets." By putting "stinky fish" on the table, colleagues can relate to each other, get more comfortable sharing, and uncover areas for learning and development.
- It's not positive or negative; it's feedback. Feedback should be critical, not in tone but in thinking, it should add value to your colleague's work or your working relationship, and a healthy mix of feedback should be given.
- Give concrete observations and make them actionable. If you give a concrete example of the behaviour or moment(s) in your feedback rather than "you always do xxx",. It enables the receiver to understand the context. Please make sure the feedback is something they can act on that is within the recipient's ability to change. If the recipient is open, give feedback

immediately or as soon as possible. This helps you let go of the negative feeling and celebrate if positive, and the message does not get blurred or lost over time.

- Find the right time and ask for permission. Only some people like surprises; ask the recipient if they would like feedback, and think about the timing and where you are. They may be having a bad day and not be in the right frame of mind; It's OK for them to say no. You can follow up another time. Be aware of the other person's needs and priorities. Choose breaks or quiet moments to talk - avoid catching people when they are in a hurry, preoccupied or too busy. Instead, allow them time to absorb and think.
- Concentrate on behaviours. Attitudes are behavioural manifestations of emotions; while we cannot necessarily control our feelings, we are in control of our behaviours. Feedback focuses on the behaviour and moves the observation away from judging the person. **You cannot change the person, only they can change themselves, but together through feedback, you can work together!**
- Do not trigger anxiety. Some people can get anxious when you ask to give feedback; you can put it in context. Think about how you set it up and the timing. For example, don't say, "can I give you some feedback?" on Slack, then leave them hanging for two days, even if it's positive! They do not know that it stops the opportunity of anxiety building for someone.

## The best way to structure and share your feedback

### Tone of voice

- Making neutral observations (distinguished from interpretations/evaluations).
- Expressing feelings (emotions separate from reasons and interpretation).
- Expressing needs (deep motives).
- Making requests (clear, concrete, feasible and without an explicit or implicit demand).

### E.A.R.N. it

A simple way to frame your feedback. Attitudes are behavioural manifestations of emotions; while we cannot control our feelings, we are in control of our behaviours. Feedback focuses on the behaviour; it moves the observation away from the personality or judging the person.

- **Event:** What was the situation?
- **Action:** What was the observed behaviour?
- **Result:** What was the impact or consequence?
- **Next Steps:** What behaviours need to be continued/changed?
- **Event** - “During yesterday’s remote team meeting...”
- **Action** “You were texting on your phone throughout...”
- **Result** “When we have time set aside for meetings, it’s important that you’re present and focused; by being on your phone, you are neither...”
- **Next Steps** (suggestion for the future) “How would you feel about leaving your phone at your desk during meetings or only answering it in an emergency?”

## Tips for delivering effective feedback

- **Do** personalise your feedback relationships. For example, learn how your teammates prefer to give and receive feedback upfront. You can even encourage your team members to write a user manual explaining their values, tendencies, and preferred methods for working with others.
- **Don't** use the “shit sandwich” (sneaking negative feedback between two “slices” of praise). Instead, give frequent feedback.
- **Do** deliver feedback privately. Don't clown people in front of your peers.
- **Do** allow for breathing room. Many feedback experts suggest waiting a few hours, or a day, before critiquing a colleague if they're upset about their performance. But... Don't wait too long. A good rule of thumb is not to wait more than 24 hours, as the specific details will start to fade away.
- **Do** deliver negative feedback in the morning—maybe not the first thing, but sooner rather than later. Our capacity for self-regulation plummets when we're worn out, making us significantly more likely to deny the validity and importance of negative feedback and less willing to seek self-improvement based on this knowledge.
- **Do avoid** lecturing. Feedback should come in welcoming, two-way conversations. The Science of Delivering Tough Messages recommends a 50–50 split between questions and statements.
- **Do** also remember to offer constructive praise. Studies found that high-performing teams receive nearly six times more positive feedback than less effective teams.

## **Some examples might give more clarity.**

### **Be descriptive about the behaviour, not about the person.**

I feel like you're not listening to me when you finish my sentences for me: you did that a few times when we were talking about the project plan. So I'd prefer to spend what I'm saying before you add your points.

### **Do not judge or label.**

You mustn't use labels to describe a person. Move your attention to what they are doing or saying instead. Don't judge their character or motives.

- You are autocratic.
- You are inflexible.
- You do this bit - you are creative.

### **Focus on performance outcomes.**

It's frustrating for me to lose valuable time with you: if you arrive late, we can't discuss everything we aimed for. However, we need to get this right because the team needs a good decision from us.

### **Don't try to change others.**

This is precisely what caused the trouble last time. If you could work early shifts, we could meet at 7 am, and this would be solved.

### **Speak plainly and clearly.**

The whole team needs to understand the impact of wide-screen on our future development plans. However, I've noticed that you haven't kept your team up to date on this. Therefore, you should include wide-screen updates in all your team meetings.

## **Avoid being vague and ambiguous.**

Well, it's pretty obvious what's going wrong here.

## **Let the other party know that you would like to provide feedback.**

Can I talk to you about the start of our meeting today - would you like to hear some feedback and my ideas? I'd like us to try and get more out of our meetings. Can we talk about how we can achieve more?

## **Feedback is a muscle; train it!**

Feedback is one of those things that gets easier the more it's practised, and also when your team has a certain level of comfort and trust in each other.

Giving and receiving feedback is like exercise, do it regularly, and you start to build the feedback muscle and may start to crave more. A healthy team feeds back easily, building trust, transparency and each other. Give feedback broadly, and give it often. Be open to receiving it broadly & receiving it constantly.

## **Walk the talk**

How you react to the feedback you receive is just as crucial as your openness to accept it. If you decide not to accept or act on the feedback your team offers, they'll be less likely to continue doing so. But conversely, what you do with the feedback you receive says a lot about your potential.

*The feedback you choose not to give is as important as the one you do. "Every day, leave at least one thing unsaid."*

## **Let's put it into action**

### **A group exercise**

Remember: "Skilled people make feedback a positive experience, leaving everyone feeling valued, even if the input itself is challenging."

### **How will this exercise work?**

Everyone has 5 minutes to write one post-it for each group member. First, capture the name of the person you are addressing. Then, complete the following two sentences for that person.

Dear . One thing I appreciate most about you is .  
One thing I like to see more of is .

Use the principles for effective feedback. Sign the post-it with your name. My tip. Keep it short and sweet.

### **Sharing is caring**

Once all participants in a group are done writing, they deliver the feedback, one by one, verbally, handing the post-it note to its addressee. Of course, the addressee should not forget to say: "Thank you for your feedback".

## References

- [Radical Candor](#)
- [Feedback checklist](#)
- [How to take critical feedback](#)
- [There's no "I" in feedback.](#)
- [Feedback: I appreciate...](#)
- [Giving and receiving feedback in teams](#)