

## Basic Guidelines for Giving Feedback

1. Clarity -- Be clear about what you want to say.
2. Emphasize the positive -- This isn't being collusive in the person's dilemma.
3. Be specific -- Avoid general comments and clarify pronouns such as "it," "that," etc.
4. Focus on behavior rather than the person.
5. Refer to behavior that can be changed.
6. Be descriptive rather than evaluative.
7. Own the feedback -- Use 'I' statements.
8. Generalizations -- Notice "all," "never," "always," etc., and ask to get more specificity -- often these words are arbitrary limits on behavior.
9. Be very careful with advice -- People rarely struggle with an issue because of the lack of some specific piece of information; often, the best help is helping the person to come to a better understanding of their issue, how it developed, and how they can identify actions to address the issue more effectively.

**Table 2. Feedback Model**

Intention	Technique	Example of Behavior
Orientation and climate: prepare person for session	Inform person ahead of time. Select appropriate time and location. Provide relaxed, respectful atmosphere. Explain/negotiate agenda.	Let's make an appointment to review your performance. What are your goals for this rotation/ clerkship? Remember the stated expectations for this procedure?
Elicitation: ask person for self-assessment	Ask what was done well and what could be improved. Ask how person felt. Use open-ended questions.	How do you think it went? What was done well? What could be improved?
Diagnosis and feedback: decide where person needs to improve and how much feedback is appropriate; give reinforcing and corrective feedback	Offer your response to observations of specific behaviors, approach, or style. Give your reasons in the context of well-defined shared goals.	When you did/said . . . I was . . . (pleased, relieved, concerned, annoyed, upset), because . . .
Improvement plan: develop specific strategies for improvement	Invite person's suggestions. Give your suggestions. Suggest articles, consultations. Teach (discuss, demonstrate, coach).	What could you do differently? This is my suggestion . . . Where will you get help? Let's reframe this problem. Let's talk about this.
Application: apply strategies to real situation	Apply planned improvements to current or future problems.	What will you do next time? Show me!
Reinforce: check person understands and agrees with what has been discussed and negotiated	Person reviews his/her behaviors needing change. Specify consequences.	What do you do well? What changes will you make? By when? What if you don't?

# Handling Criticism With Honesty and Grace

Perhaps one of the most vulnerable of moments is when someone criticizes you, especially if that person knows you well. The scalpel of her comments can be surgically rapid and close to the bone, more damaging than the rubber hammer of a stranger's passing slight. Yet, as the old saying goes, "What doesn't kill us will make us stronger."

People are most revealing when offering praise or criticism. Praise indicates what they most like about themselves and criticism often shows what they least like or feel least competent about in themselves. So criticism is actually a two-way mirror. How can you respond to another's criticism with honesty and grace and actually gain new insights about yourself and the other person in the process?

## **First Recognize That You Are an Animal Under Attack**

Whether you are with someone you love, hate, know little or just met, in the first moments when you realize that you are being criticized you will react the same. Your heart beats faster, skin temperature goes down and you even lose peripheral vision. Because you feel under attack, your first instincts are to focus on that feeling, making it more intense. You will then feel like withdrawing or retaliating. Just remember that both instinctual responses are akin to saying, "I don't like your comments therefore I will give you more power." Attempt to do neither as both fight or flight responses leave you with fewer options, not more.

When you focus on your feelings, you will be distracted from hearing the content of the comments. You are more likely to react, rather than choose how you want to act. Avoid a "face-off" of escalation of comments between the two of you. Instead imagine a triangle of three entities: the other person, you and the topic of the criticism. Picture you both staring at the criticism, the third point in the triangle, to work through the comments, rather than staring each other down, where one person has to be wrong.

## **Look to Their Positive Intent, Especially When They Appear to Have None**

You are your most disarming when you compliment someone else for taking the time to give you feedback. You take the wind out of their sails. The other person may even backtrack. Yet our first instincts are to look for the ways we are right and others are . . . less right. In responding to criticism, the momentum of defensive emotions builds fast. Why? Because we mentally focus on the smart, thoughtful, and "right" things we are doing, while obsessing about the dumb, thoughtless, and otherwise wrong things the other person is doing. This tendency leads us to take a superior or righteous position, get more rigid, and listen less as the criticism continues.

Difficult as you might find it, try staying mindful of your worst side and their best side as you engage in responding to the criticism. You will probably be more generous and patient with them, and increase the chances that they will see areas where you might be right after all. Act as if they mean well, especially if it appears they do not, not for them, but for yourself. The more you can look to their positive intent, the greater the likelihood that you can respond to their comments without their adding more or elaborating before you can respond to their first comments.

Here's an easy to remember four step process to follow when responding to a criticism. Remember it is never comfortable to hear negative comments. I just find this approach makes it easier than any other alternative I've found.

## **"AAA" Approach to Responding to Criticism**

### **Step One: Acknowledge.**

Acknowledge that you heard the person, with a pause (buys time for both to cool off), nod, or verbal acknowledgment that demonstrates that you heard them. Whether the criticism is "justified" or not, if you attempt to avoid discussing it, it will loom larger in everyone's minds that heard it and stick to you like fly paper, as you attempt to move on. Do not disagree or counter- attack. Prove that you have heard his comment. Perhaps say "I understand you have a concern" rather than "You shouldn't have . . ." ). Avoid blaming or "bad labeling" language such as "That's a lie" or "You don't know what you are talking about." You will only pour hot coals on the heat of escalation and harden the person into their position so she will want to elaborate.

### **Step Two: Ask for More.**

Ask for more information so you both can cool off more and stay focussed on the issue, not the feelings or personalities. Go slow to go faster later in reaching agreement about how to resolve the criticism. Try to "warm up" to the part of the person you can respect -- focus on it mentally and refer to it verbally: "You are so dedicated" or "knowledgeable" or whatever their self- image is that leads them toward making the criticism. The more fully the other person feels or hears, the more likely that he will be receptive to your response, whether it is to agree or disagree.

### **Step Three: Add Your Own**

Add your own, asking permission first. If you believe the comments are accurate, then say so. If an apology is in order, give it sooner rather than later. Then say what you plan to do differently to respond to the criticism. Ask for their response to your comments and again thank the person for being thoughtful in offering them. The sooner you verbally agree, if you find truth in the criticism, the more likely that you will engender respect from the other person and any others who witness the interaction. In fact, if you tell others who are important to that person that you were wrong and appreciate his pointing it out to you, you will feel and appear more comfortable with yourself.

If, on the other hand, you disagree with the comments, say "May I tell you my perspective?" This sets the other person up to give you permission to state your view as you have been willing to listen to theirs.

## **Here are some other ways to respond to criticism.**

### **Dump Their Stuff Back in Their Lap**

If someone is verbally dumping on you, do not interrupt, counter, or counterattack in midstream, or you will only prolong and intensify their comments. When they have finished, ask "Is there anything else you want to add?" Then say, "What would make this situation better?" or "How can we improve this situation in a way you believe we can both accept?"

### **What Will Make it Better?**

Ask them to propose a solution to the issue they have raised. If they continue to complain or attack, acknowledge you heard them each time and, like a broken record, repeat yourself in increasingly brief language variations: "What will make it better?" State your view and what you would like from them. If they disagree, then ask, "What would make this situation better for both of us?" Move the other person from a mode of criticizing to problem solving. If she or he continues to criticize, act like a broken record. In a calm voice, again acknowledge and ask more briefly: I understand you have a concern and we disagree. What would make it better for us both?" If the other person continues on the downward track of criticism, say, "I want to find a way to resolve your concern. When do you want to talk about it next?" Then you can remove yourself from the tone of that discussion and put the other person in the position of initiating follow-up.

## **Presume Innocence**

What if you believe another person is actually lying to you? "Naive you are if you believe life favors those who aren't naive," Mason Williams once said. Nobody wants to be told they are wrong. Whenever you have reason to believe someone is lying or not making sense, you will not build rapport by pointing it out to them. Allow them to save face and keep asking questions until you lose imagination or control. Say, for example, "How does that relate to the . . ." (then state the apparently conflicting information). You might find you were wrong, and thus you "save face." Or, by continued non threatening questions, you can "softly corner" the other person into self-correcting, which protects your future relationship.

## **Learn How Personalities Clash**

To gain insights into the kind of people who are most likely to criticize you and why; and those you are most likely to criticize, learn more about your personality type according to the classic Myers Briggs process. Even if you have taken the test in the past, take a quick, free refresher course online. Here are two places where you can both take an abbreviated version of the test and read about what happens when different personality types clash and what you can do to better respond:

[Test 1](#)

[Test 2](#)

## **Demonstrate visible goodwill upfront.**

When criticized, you are more likely to find resolutions sooner when the other person comes to trust your positive intent. Demonstrate your willingness to find a compromise and ability to be genial even and especially if you don't like the person or the situation. Often the best solution to a criticism leaves both parties a little unhappy but not enough to retaliate later on. You are both somewhat satisfied with your compromise and willing to move on.

## **Know that "less is often more."**

Especially in the beginning, listen more, talk and move less, keep your motions and voice lower and slower. These animal behaviors increase the chances that others will feel more safe and comfortable around you.

## **Act to enable them to save face and you will preserve the relationship.**

If you think they are lying, keep asking questions (until you lose control or run out of imagination) rather than accusing them of misrepresentation. Asking questions gives you the time to see if you were mistaken, thus possibly saving face for yourself, while gently cornering them to make a self-admission that they were mistaken and volunteer an alternative. You also leave room to escalate later.

Honor commonalities more frequently than bringing up the differences. What ever you refer to most and most intensely will be the center of your relationship. Keep referring to the part of them and their points that you can support and want to expand upon.

## **Let Them See It Differently**

If the other person does not accept your response at first, consider making the same suggestion later on and in a different way another way. Do not overlook rearranging the same elements of a suggestion or offer to find a more mutually attractive compromise. Choose Your Approach

Contemplate how you say what you say. Consider their perspective in how you make any request. For example, a priest once asked his superior if he could smoke while praying, which led to a negative answer. Yet if he'd asked if he could pray while smoking he might have received a more positive response.

In considering any of these ways to respond to criticism, know that the worst way is to keep it inside and festering. Your reaction will always show one way or the other