

Ten common mistakes in giving feedback—and how to fix them

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Mistake One

The feedback judges individuals, not actions

The Fix:

Give factual, nonjudgmental descriptions that could be recorded on tape or video, rather than judgments (good/bad, right/ wrong, must/mustn't, ...).

Describe *what* you heard and saw, like an objective scientist or reporter. Be factual and brief, without interpreting, minimizing, or exaggerating.

Focus objectively on the other person's *behavior*, not the person! Then summarize the impact of their behavior on *your* current feelings, sensations, thoughts, and needs.

Mistake Two

The feedback is too vague

The Fix

Provide specifics when recalling the situation.

Provide specifics when describing the behavior.

Acknowledge the detailed impact of the behavior on you, the giver.

Use verbatim quotes to help ground the discussion.

Mistake Three

The feedback speaks for others

The Fix

Avoid guessing and then sharing the person's behavioral effect on others ("You usually come across as egotistical.") unless the others are present to confirm it, it risks mis-assuming, misunderstanding, guilt, defensiveness, and reciprocal assumptions and judgments.

Say "I felt" or "I was" to frame your message, as opposed to speaking for your colleagues using "we."

Don't pass along vague feedback from others – even if they have come to you to express their concerns; allow them the opportunity to share their own thoughts and feelings.

Mistake Four

Negative feedback gets sandwiched between positive messages or is cushioned

The Fix

Use "I" and "You" rather than "We." Trying to sugarcoat your feedback to avoid "hurt feelings" (e.g. "We really need to do better at staying focused on one topic at a time") often breeds semi-conscious discomfort and distrust.

Note that *withholding* feedback to avoid "hurting the other person's feelings" OR to protect yourself from a difficult situation may deprive both of you a chance to grow.

Don't label your feedback as positive or negative (e.g., "I have some negative feedback to give you" or "do you want the good or bad news first?") Allow the other person to come to their own conclusions and feelings about the feedback.

Sandwiching negative feedback between two positives is often ineffective – receivers tend to see through this technique and focus on the negatives. Being up front with concerns allows for focused attention. If you want someone to hear your positive messages, provide isolated time for focus on these as well, so the recipient can really hear the positives.

Finally, don't qualify your experience as means of cushioning. For example, "I felt like you attacked me in the team meeting when you told me "I screwed up the project for everyone," but I may have just been overly sensitive and need thicker skin."

Mistake Five

The feedback is exaggerated with generalities

The Fix

Eliminate words like "always" and "never" when describing the other person's behavior (this is relevant in giving both positive and negative).

In a negative feedback situation, saying "You never come to meetings on time" or "You are always late" inspires defensiveness and a quick list of times when the person DID come on time, etc. This negates the message you are trying to give and makes the other person less receptive to hearing the message.

In a positive feedback situation, generalities might seem more acceptable ("You always are the hardest worker on the team" or "I never see you with a frown.") This can make the recipient feel flattered but uncomfortable as well, as likely she can think of contradictory examples, and may also feel that she is no longer allowed NOT to be the hardest worker, or to have a down day where smiling is hard to do. It's a subtle but real effect.

Mistake Six

The feedback psychoanalyzes the motives behind the behavior

The Fix

Avoid guessing *why* the person did what they did, unless they invite you to brainstorm. Otherwise, you miss the real target: alerting them to their behavior's *impact*, and reasons to change their attitudes and/or behavior. Second-guessing can imply you feel one-up, and trigger defensiveness, hurt, resentment, dependency, withdrawal, and/or "deafness" to the information that you are trying to share.

Mistake Seven

The feedback is mistimed or goes on too long

The Fix

Don't delay in giving feedback – wait long enough to clarify your motives, message, and goals, and also to understand a little more of the needs of the other person so as not to act in anger, but most of the time sooner is better.

Watch out for *flooding*. In your zeal to empower the other person and feel wonderful about yourself, you may give feedback *too fast*, or give *too much* at once. Typically, one person is faster at thinking, speaking, and/or reacting than the other. Limiting your comments to a few sentences at most and then asking for any response can guard against flooding.

Also, try focusing on a single message – what's the most important thing you would like this person to hear and how? Try giving that message in a few sentences and then stop talking to give the other person time to absorb and think.

Mistake Eight

The feedback contains an implied threat

The Fix

Avoid tying your feedback to results or consequences unrelated to how the action has made you think and feel. This can apply to both positive and negative situations. For example, saying, as a peer, that "you keep that behavior up and your likely going to get promoted" may leave the other person wondering if that's ok with you or if you feel threatened. On the flip side, saying "Your methods of communicating suggest to me that you are not a great fit for this organization" indicates the person might be fired or ostracized.

Mistake Nine

The feedback is insensitive to the other person's needs

The Fix

Avoid insensitive terminology by practicing your feedback message with someone who doesn't know the individual involved – how did it make your practice partner feel?

Avoid inappropriate humor. Sometimes it's easy to "joke" away an issue but this can confuse the message and make the other person feel less comfortable. Sometimes this is a

stylistic issue – you may feel that humor is in keeping with your personality, but really consider the personality of the person whom you are speaking with – does this fit with their needs?

Avoid patriarchal messages, which stem from the viewpoint of changing the behavior of the other person for his/her own good. This implies you know best instead stick to some of the guidelines above—describe the situation, the behavior, and its impact on you. Then let the other person respond. Beware of "You need to...", which is a covert way of saying "I want you to..." Also: "You never..." and "You always..." tend to feel judgmental, overwhelming, and can spoil mutually respectful feedback fast.

Avoid providing your feedback in the form of a question, which puts the person in a difficult situation of trying to figure out where you stand, or in agreeing or disagreeing with you. For example “Don’t you think your presentation went on too long?” or “how do you feel your long presentation went over with the others?” Plus, your message becomes less clear and unfocused.

Mistake Ten

The feedback pulls in your own vulnerabilities and experiences

The Fix

Remember—the feedback you are giving is directed to the recipient not about yourself! Seems basic, but this mistake is committed a lot!

This mistake can often take a couple of different forms. Avoid being “a topper” – topping the other person’s experience with your own stories. For example “I used to have trouble talking too much in meeting. There was this one time when...” This takes the focus away from the individual at hand. Or “You gave a great presentation. You should have seen the one I gave to the CEO last fall – it knocked her socks off!” This undermines the impact of the work and actions done by the recipient.

Also, in an attempt to make the other person feel more at ease, there is a temptation to talk about all the ways you might have screwed up or struggled. Again, this takes the focus away from the recipient.

Another way this mistake might take form is to illustrate and issue for someone by giving examples of how you do it differently: “Becky, you came across really defensive today in the meeting when John challenged your new idea. What I do in that situation is thank him for his input and let him know I will take it into consideration. That’s how I stay on his good side.” Perhaps the recipient will ask you for advice, but let him or her solicit.