

How to Give Effective Feedback

Here's a quick look at how to structure your feedback – and principles for making sure your feedback is effective.

FEEDBACK STRUCTURE

Here are the key components of giving thoughtful feedback:

- 1. Describe the behavior** you've observed in a short sentence: "I've noticed recently that when running meetings you sometimes have trouble keeping the group focused on the agenda."
- 2. Provide two or three concrete examples** to support your feedback. For instance, you might say, "On our call with X last week, and in our meeting with Y today, I noticed that the team spent a while talking about topics that weren't on the agenda and didn't have a chance to do the brainstorming you'd had planned or talk about next steps."
- 3. State the impact** of the behavior on you, and as appropriate on your team, department, or organization: "We ended up not having time to reach conclusions and had to schedule a follow-up later, and we lost the attention of a couple people when the topic we veered into wasn't relevant to them."
- 4. Make a recommendation:** "Try allotting specific amounts of time to each item on your agenda to keep the meeting on track."

The structure above applies for positive feedback as well (with the recommendation at the end amounting to "keep it up!"). However, for corrective or developmental feedback, make sure to do one additional step:

- 5. Follow up.** Make a note to revisit the topic a month or so later and discuss how it's been going. You might need to give additional guidance or correction, or – hopefully – you'll be able to recognize and praise the staff member's progress.

PRINCIPLES FOR ENSURING YOUR FEEDBACK IS EFFECTIVE

Now that you know how to structure feedback thoughtfully, use these six tips to make sure it's effective as possible.

- 1. Provide feedback on a constant, ongoing basis.** Don't wait for formal performance evaluations or until something has become a large and ingrained problem. Making feedback a

MAKE IT A CONVERSATION

Giving feedback shouldn't be a monologue; it should be a two-way conversation where you share your thoughts and solicit the staff member's input. As you use the basic structure to the left, don't forget to pause to hear your staffer's thoughts and ask for her assessment.

You might ask questions like:

- "What do you think?"
- "What's your take on that?"
- "What do you think happened there?"
- "How could you approach it differently?"

regular part of your conversations with staff members (such as making it an item on every weekly check-in agenda) will help “normalize” it so that staff members (hopefully) won’t see it as a Big Scary Conversation that only occurs occasionally.

2. Make sure you’re giving all three types of feedback:

- positive feedback for behavior that you want to see more of
- developmental feedback, which tells already good staff members how they can get even better at what they do
- corrective feedback when something needs to change in order to meet expectations

Often, managers will give just one of these and neglect the other two.

3. Name the issue. It sounds obvious, but sometimes just coming up with a label for a behavior you want to see can be powerful. For instance, if you’re uneasy with the way a staff member is conducting meetings, don’t just tell her she needs to work on running meetings better. Instead, identify specifically what the issue is, so that you can name it for her – possibly saying something like, “I’d like you to make sure that we don’t rush through topics that people need a chance to discuss, and that we have a mechanism for tracking next steps before the meeting ends.”

4. Don’t put it off. The longer you wait to give feedback, the more awkward the conversation will be when you finally do have it (additionally, the problem may have taken root, and the staff member may wonder why you didn’t tell her earlier).

5. When a problematic behavior has become a pattern, talk about the pattern; don’t just keep giving feedback on individual occurrences. If you just address the individual instances, your staff member may not connect the dots and realize that issues she might have viewed as relatively minor on their own in fact add up to a more serious concern when viewed all together. For instance, if your staff member regularly has errors in her work, don’t just address the latest error; instead, say, “I’m concerned by the number of errors I’ve been catching in your work, and it’s making me concerned I need to look at everything you produce before it goes out. I need you to consistently produce error-free documents.”

6. Some issues will eventually need to be addressed as performance issues. If a problem persists after talking about it directly, you may need to begin thinking about the staff member’s fundamental fit for the role and move to a more serious performance warning conversation.

ISSUES TO KEEP AN EYE ON

Seems straightforward, right? Of course, in practice, it’s not always quite as simple. Here are some situations that might arise while you’re giving feedback and which you should be prepared to handle:

- *While giving feedback, you realize that you hadn’t provided the staff member with clear guidance at the outset.* For instance, maybe you weren’t clear about the final outcome you were seeking, or you forgot to mention some key resources that would have pointed the staffer in the right direction. If this happens, acknowledge that you could have done better – but don’t shy away from getting the staff member back on the right course now. For instance, you might say, “I realize now that I didn’t make this clear when we first talked, but I’d love for you to get Jen and Javier’s input on this before you finalize the

report, since they'll likely have great insights on how to talk about the issues you raise on page 5."

- *In the feedback conversation, you discover that the staff member is facing challenges you hadn't known about.* For instance, competing priorities may have impacted how much time and focus she gave the project you're providing feedback on, or she might have had trouble getting information she needed from another team. If this is the case, talk about how to resolve those issues going forward. She might need help balancing her priorities, guidance on getting what she needs from others, or other advice that you can lend now that you're aware of the issues. In this case, you should also give feedback about how she should come to you proactively with issues and challenges in the future, so that you're in the loop.
- *The staff member is upset by your feedback.* Occasionally a staff member might become upset, angry, or defensive at your feedback. If this happens, ask the staffer for her take on the situation – does she think you're off-base? Is there information you're missing? Listen with an open mind. If her input doesn't change your assessment, acknowledge that you have different viewpoints but ask her to try what you're requesting anyway. For instance, to a staff member who feels you're being overly critical of work she's produced, you might say, "I hear you that you see it differently. I'm going to keep your view in mind, and I know that it might be challenging, but for now I need you to try to proceed in the way that I'm asking."