

FEEDBACK

One of a leader's responsibilities is to create and utilize a forum for open and constructive communication in which feedback is a critically important aspect.

Do you proactively and clearly communicate your thoughts, feelings and reactions to others, or do you only provide reactionary responses to various situations? If you said yes to the first portion of this question, then read no further, you are providing effective feedback to others! But, if you are like the vast majority of us who sometimes forget to provide proactive, well-thought-out responses to others, then read on!

Feedback is communicating to others how some action or behavior affected us or other people. It is the information that flows between people. Effective feedback can be heard by the receiver, keeps the relationship intact, is open and healthy, and validates the feedback process in future interactions.

Feedback that is positive and constructive is helpful to others. When you give feedback, you are offering valuable information that will be useful to another person making decisions about some aspect of his/her life. Feedback allows us to build and maintain closeness with others.

Feedback is not criticism! Criticism is evaluative and negative, feedback is descriptive and positive. Feedback provides individuals with information that can be used in performing personal evaluation. Effective feedback does not assume that the giver is totally right and the receiver wrong; instead, it is an invitation to develop interactions in relationships which will have duration and importance in our lives.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

- ❑ ***It is specific rather than general.*** To be told that one is "dominating" will probably not be as useful as to be told that "Just now you were not listening to what the others said, but I felt that I had to agree with your arguments or face attack from you."
- ❑ ***It is focused on behavior rather than on the person.*** It is important that we refer to what a person does rather than on what type of person we think or imagine he/she could be. Thus, we might say that a person "talked more than anyone else in this meeting" rather than, he/she is a "loudmouth." The former allows for the possibility for change; the latter implies a fixed personality trait.
- ❑ ***It takes into account the needs of the feedback receiver.*** Feedback can be destructive when it serves only personal needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. It should be given to help, not hurt. All too often, we give feedback because it makes us feel better or gives us a psychological advantage.

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- ❑ ***It is solicited, rather than imposed.*** Feedback is most useful when the receiver has formulated the kind of question which those observing can respond to.
- ❑ ***It involves sharing of information rather than giving advice.*** By sharing information, we leave a person free to decide in accordance with goals, needs, etc. When we give advice we tell a person what to do and to some degree take away the person's freedom to decide for himself.
- ❑ ***It is well-timed.*** In general, immediate feedback is most useful (depending, of course, on the person's readiness to hear it, support available from others, etc.). The reception and use of feedback involves many possible emotional reactions. Excellent feedback presented at an inappropriate time may do more harm than good.
- ❑ ***It involves the amount of information the receiver can use rather than the amount we would like to give.*** To overload persons with feedback is to reduce the possibility that they may be able to use what they received effectively. When we give more than can be used, we are more often than not satisfying some need of our own rather than helping the other person.
- ❑ ***It concerns what is said or done, or how it is said or done, not why.*** The "why" takes us from the observable to the inferred and involves assumptions regarding motive or intent. Telling a person what his/her motivations or intentions are more often than not tends to alienate the person and contributes to a climate of resentment, suspicion and distrust; it does not contribute to learning or development. It is dangerous to assume that we know why a person says or does something, or what he/she "really" means, or what he/she is "really" trying to accomplish. If we are uncertain of the person's motives or intent, this uncertainty itself is feedback and should be revealed.
- ❑ ***It is checked to insure clear communication.*** One way of doing this is to have the receiver try to rephrase the feedback received to see if it corresponds to what the sender has in mind. No matter what the intent, feedback is often threatening and thus subject to considerable distortion or misinterpretation.