



Unit 3

Providing Effective Feedback

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- Understand the difference between content and process

Unit 3

Providing Effective Feedback

Giving Feedback

Part of your role as a facilitator includes providing and accepting feedback. People have very strong opinions about the effectiveness of meetings as well as facilitation, and it is important that you are providing a service that they value. It's also important that you are able to accept their feedback and make changes that are needed to provide them an experience that they will appreciate. You can gather feedback on how the meeting is going, behavior of the participants, whether objectives are being met, whether people have the tools necessary to uncover problems and make decisions, and how well you are doing.

Principles of Good Feedback

The goal of asking for and providing feedback is to make improvements. Therefore, feedback needs to be positive and constructive. It also needs to be offered as closely to the time being discussed as possible, so that people can relate to what was going on at the time. In order to provide feedback that is accepted, the following principles apply:

- **Ask permission** before you provide feedback to ensure that the person or the group is ready to hear what you have to say. If they are not ready, negotiate a better time to talk. Feedback should not be forced on someone, and if it is, you'll find that they do not hear you anyway.
- Be **professional** and **tactful**. Remember that the idea is to improve circumstances or behavior.
- Keep comments **focused on the behavior** and not the person. "You seem uninterested," is not as effective as, "You have returned late from all our breaks in this session, you are checking your phone frequently, and you have not contributed any comments today."
- **Be specific** and describe what has happened, not your impression of what happened. For example, say, "You have been involved in several sidebar conversations this morning," rather than, "You seem distracted."
- Ask the person if your feedback has been **fair and accurate**. If it's not, they'll usually let you know. This kind of approach also helps them to take responsibility for their actions.
- Offer **positive feedback** when things are going well. We can all use some positive reinforcement!

Feedback Formats

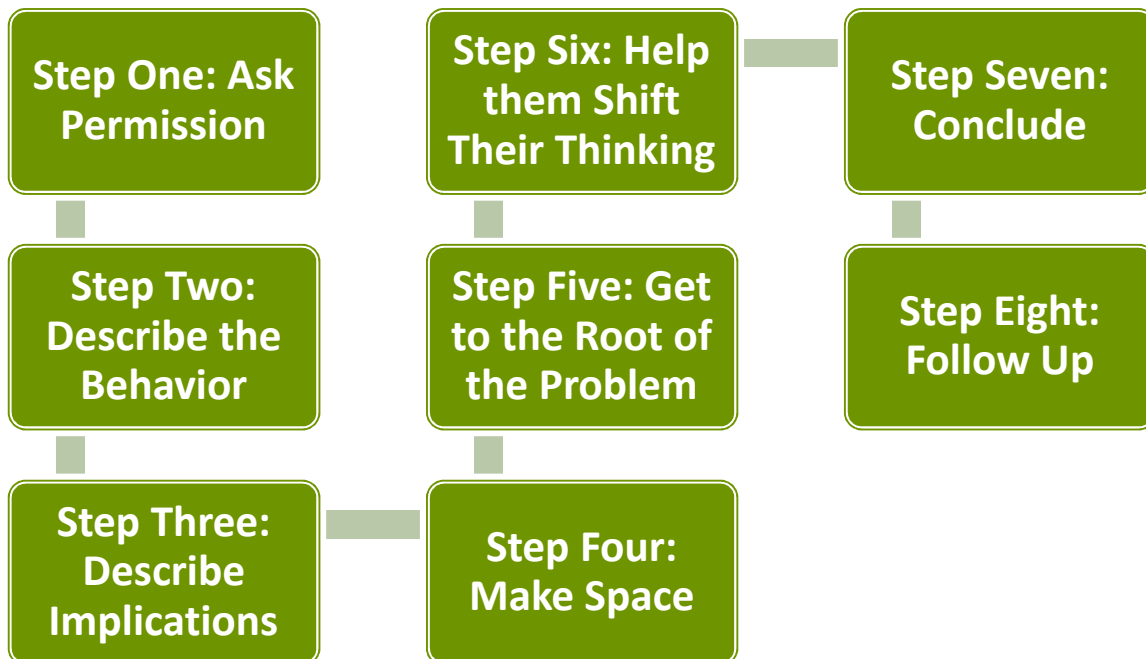
Facilitators have plenty of options when it comes to gathering feedback. Depending on the nature and size of the group, here are some ideas:

- Complete a paper or electronic survey. Then, analyze and discuss the results.
- Post questions within the meeting room and ask participants to rate the items. (You can list bullet points and have them check off what they think or write comments.)
- If the group is technologically savvy and has their smartphones, establish a hashtag (#) abbreviation, and have groups provide feedback and contribute comments over a social networking site such as Twitter.
- List what is and what is not going well. Then, create an action plan that the group agrees to in order to make the needed improvements.

The Feedback Process

Sometimes we're asked to facilitate a group that doesn't seem to need a facilitator. Everyone is courteous, they seem to get along, and they are not identifying any kind of problem. This is where you are needed more than ever!

You'll need to point out the behavior you are witnessing and then get participants talking and working together on things that matter. After all, you've been asked here for a reason! And, as we've highlighted already, feedback is necessary for other reasons, too. Here is a process that you will find very practical in your work as a facilitator.



Step One: Ask permission.

Background: You need to ask permission for a few reasons. First, this allows the receiver to identify if there is a better time. Second, when they grant you permission, it signals that they are open to hearing what you say.

Example: “I’m going to insert a break here and then offer you some feedback that I think will help things along. Is that okay with everyone?”

Step Two: Describe the behavior.

Background: Don’t focus on specific people. Instead, give a clear description of what you saw and heard.

Example: “In the e-mail survey that I sent last week, several of you mentioned very specific examples of what was not working on this team. We’ve been here for an hour already, and no one has mentioned these examples.”

Step Three: Describe the implication of continuing the behavior.

Background: Be professional and tactful. Your goal is to provide the group with the safety and security to openly speak about these issues.

Example: “If you don’t feel comfortable in discussing these issues, things are not going to change.”

Step Four: Provide space for the other person(s) to respond.

Background: Listen attentively, paraphrase, and summarize. Arrange smaller groups for discussion if that will help quiet people speak up.

Example: “You’ve explained that these issues aren’t being discussed because people are afraid of insulting one another, and that there is a potential for backlash. Do I have that correct?”

Step Five: Get to the root of the problem.

Background: Make sure that you are dealing with the real problem and not just symptoms. Acknowledge that the issue can be dealt with as a problem that needs solving.

Example: “What steps can you take to make sure we have the safety in this environment to proceed?” Suggestions could include ground rules or agreements like:

- What is said in this room stays in this room.
- We are here to make progress and to improve.
- We are committing to being open-minded and open to change.

Step Six: Help them shift their thinking.

Background: Since people listen to themselves far more readily than they accept the ideas of others, have the members of the group offer their ideas and support what they have to offer. Build on their ideas to help them move ahead.

Example: “I think the suggestions you are offering will work. I have a couple of ideas to add so that we can move ahead. Would that be okay with you?”

Step Seven: Conclude the feedback session.

Background: Establish a clear action plan which you will support and encourage them through. Let people know that they since have worked through this, you will be returning to the agenda. (You may want to offer a short break or stretch as a transition.)

Example: “Thank you for your openness and willingness to work through this problem together. As we move ahead, we’re committed to...”

Step Eight: Follow up.

Background: If the group is making a significant shift in behavior, they may need more support than you initially expect. You need to follow through with that support so that you don’t have to go through the entire process again later.

Example: An hour or so later, you can ask, “Is everyone comfortable with how we are doing now? Is there anything else we need to adjust?”

One Step Further

Facilitators and Feedback Language

Facilitators use language that helps people to feel comfortable and welcome to speak. They try to avoid questions and comments directed to people. They focus on behavior. They avoid assumptions and generalizations such as, “usually,” “always,” or “you should.” They focus on phrases such as, “What do you think of...” or “Let’s try...”

In opening up a session for feedback, they will use statements like:

- I have noticed...
- Can I offer you a suggestion?
- I am wondering if...
- I am concerned about...

Tips for Receiving Feedback

As a facilitator, it’s also helpful if you can take some time and help people in accepting feedback. (This will be helpful to participants in facilitation as well as performance reviews!) This can be difficult for many of us, partly because we do not know how to accept a compliment, and partly because we are so determined to avoid making mistakes or failing.

Participants can learn how to accept feedback in an open manner by:

- Listening with an open mind and heart.
- Encouraging the speaker to focus on their behaviors, not them (if they are having trouble with this).
- Using open ended questions, summarizing, and paraphrasing to ensure your own understanding.
- Trying not to get emotional or defensive.
- Offering your point of view, maintaining a calm voice and relaxed tone.
- Accepting that even if you don’t like what you are hearing, when it comes to being accountable, you have to take responsibility for your actions (or non-actions).
- Offering solutions, rather than expecting the other person to tell you what to do.
- Listening for the other person’s perspective and how your behavior impacts him or her, as well as the team.
- Do your best consistently and reliably.
- Thank someone who offers you a compliment.

Managing Divergent Perspectives

Sequencing

Usually if a lot of people are taking part in a discussion, there are a lot of differing perspectives on the issues. When this happens, everyone approaches the topic from their own point of view and their own frame of reference. The facilitator's challenge is to help people value one another's contributions.

Sometimes facilitators have a tendency to cut people off if they appear to be off topic. However, deciding what is off topic and what will eventually help the group understand one another better is not easy to discern.

What can a facilitator do? The simplest and most straightforward technique is **sequencing**. With this technique, the facilitator validates each perspective and then directs a group to focus on each line of thought in sequence, one at a time. This is very similar to queuing or stacking, except with points of view rather than speakers being stacked.

Case Study

A group of managers met to discuss buying new computers. One manager, Tom, made a controversial statement about Microsoft Word, and another manager, Janet, had a private reaction to that statement.

"I hope Tom stops talking soon," thought Janet. "He's going on a tangent and is wasting our time."

However, the next person to speak responded to Tom's comment. After a few minutes Janet said, "OK, folks, we've got to get this discussion back on track." Someone else said, "Thanks, Janet. I too thought we'd drifted off topic." This was a critical juncture. Tom felt like he had been put down, and Janet felt irritated and guilty.

Question

How could a facilitator have handled this situation differently?

Further Reading:

- ✓ Berger, Duane, Michael Doyle, Sarah Fisk, Sam Kaner, Lenny Lind, and Catherine Toldi. *Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*. Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- ✓ Petz, Jon. *Boring Meetings Suck*. Wiley, 2011.