



Unit 11

Giving Effective Feedback

Learning Outcomes

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

- ✓ Explain why feedback is essential
- ✓ Apply a framework for providing formal or informal feedback
- ✓ Use descriptive language in delivering feedback
- ✓ Describe six characteristics of effective feedback
- ✓ Provide feedback in real situations

Unit 11

Feedback and Its Essentials

Definitions

Food for Thought

When it comes to providing feedback, there are a few things to tell ourselves. First of all, feedback is a commentary on how you think someone is doing, and as such that feedback can include positive or negative observations, or both. Feedback that is heard and acted upon is what we would consider **effective feedback**. This sort of feedback is provided in a constructive manner.

Providing **constructive feedback** means that you are focused on providing feedback in a helpful manner, to help the other individual to learn and grow, not to insult, belittle, or punish them. (Sometimes actions do require some kind of negative consequence, too, but that is separate from this process.) Our objective in this course is to help you provide constructive feedback.

Our experience has shown us that some people do not like getting feedback at all. They may have had bad experiences with performance reviews or harshly judgmental parents or coaches growing up. Or, perhaps they are modest and not accustomed to receiving praise or speaking about themselves in front of others. Keep these potential anxieties in mind as you prepare to deliver feedback.

As well, feedback is supposed to be delivered honestly, but some of us are not very good about being honest. On the one hand, many workplace supervisors are concerned with being perceived as “fair and friendly.” Instead of being honest, they avoid delivering the truth in case the employee dislikes them for it.

On the other hand, we can be so honest with people that we are hurtful instead of being constructive. Another question to ask yourself is: can our desire to be honest release too much information and be hurtful instead of constructive?

When Feedback is Needed

Some people want – and need – feedback more frequently than others. It’s up to you to gauge what is appropriate and what you can offer constructively and effectively. Most people get far less feedback than they want. If you change your habits to deliver more feedback more frequently, that’s great! We see feedback as a positive event, and we will teach you how to make it that way.

When it comes to formal performance review time (which is typically annually or semi-annually), people expect to get feedback from you. However, it is our position that there should never be any surprises in the formal review. Your people should already know how they are doing and what they need to be working on because of the informal feedback that you provide. In addition, they should never be told that they've been doing something incorrectly for six months and you have decided to withhold the information from them until the formal review is completed. Doing so creates bad feelings and can erode trust with your team.

Scenario One

Sue, one of your direct reports, asks you if the business case they wrote last week is suitable for forwarding to the board.

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Two

Sam, also one of your direct reports, asks if you received the e-mail that they sent you two minutes ago, and whether or not you are going to respond. They check up e-mails that they have sent in this manner all the time.

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Three

Your photocopy repair technician completes a tune-up on your copier, but after he leaves you notice that there is a faint grey line printing on the margin of each copy that comes off the machine.

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Four

Your best friend has broccoli stuck in their teeth.

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Five

Your business partner regularly mispronounces spaghetti as “bisghetti.”

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Six

Your pre-teen child aspires to be a famous musician but their attempts at learning their instrument are making you crazy. Would you tell them about how they sound, or take them for lessons so that they can get better quickly?

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Scenario Seven

Your elderly grandmother remembers your favorite childhood dish as Spaghetti Bolognese and spends six hours creating the best sauce ever. When you sit down to dinner will you remind her that you have been a vegetarian for the last year?

Does this person need feedback from you?

How much feedback do they need?

What might your feedback look like?

Speaking Clearly

Being Descriptive

When providing feedback, you want to make sure that people are hearing what it is that you are saying, so you need to make sure that the language that you use is descriptive and clear.

Use the space below to record some words that you would find helpful and unhelpful during feedback.

Helpful Words	Unhelpful Words

Staying Neutral

Words and body language are our only real tools when it comes to delivering feedback (although you will probably do formal performance reviews in writing too), and it is extremely important to manage what you are saying with your mouth and through your posture, gestures, and facial expressions.

Keep in mind that your goal is to provide constructive criticism that is heard and acted upon. This means that it's essential that you keep your words and body language consistent.

Communication Strategies

Basic Skills

If you are going to improve your feedback skills, you also need to work on your ability to ask thoughtful questions; questions that give us more information about the individual you are speaking with (whether it is an employee, colleague, or a supplier) and their work, thoughts, and feelings. To be successful in hosting a feedback meeting or interview, the interviewer must have knowledge and skills in both being an effective listener and in asking the right questions in order to be effective.

As leaders, we should be spending a lot of our time asking questions and providing answers. When it comes to asking, however, we often aren't aware of our technique. Open questions in particular often give us difficulty, which is unfortunate since they are the most important ones for us to become skilled at using. If you are having trouble with open questions, it can be helpful to get more comfortable with small talk and easing yourself into the conversation at hand.

Questioning Skills

The right questions provide structure to your feedback session. Here are some general guidelines:

- 👉 Ask one question at a time, instead of trying to get to everything at once.

- Ñ Phrase the question in simple, easily understandable words and terms that don't intimidate your conversation partner.
- Ñ Keep your questions brief. Questions that are more than two sentences in length are too long; break them up and ask them as two or more questions.
- Ñ Keep your phrasing positive. Reframe negative questions to make them more positive, which will encourage conversation.
- Ñ Use open questions to get more information, rather than relying on closed questions.
- Ñ Follow up on incomplete answers by probing for more information.

You can plan for the conversation ahead of time and decide what kind of questions to ask depending on what your goals are. Design your questions to help you with any of the following:

- Ñ Get information
- Ñ Gain consensus
- Ñ Focus conversations
- Ñ Begin closing the conversation
- Ñ Gather opinions

It is helpful to have some good questions ready that relate to the feedback conversation. List some ideas below.

To improve your communication skills, consider the following types of questions.

Good Questions

Open Ended Questions

These are broad, general questions that require your conversation partner to provide more than just a “yes” or “no” answer. They also permit the other person to decide how much information to give.

Open questions can do the following:

- Ñ Give us more information
- Ñ Encourage your conversation partner to speak openly
- Ñ Encourage people to share opinions and ideas
- Ñ Help us determine if people have interpreted what we say accurately

The following are examples of open ended questions that can be used in a formal feedback or performance evaluation meeting:

- Ñ “In your own words, evaluate your accomplishments this quarter.”
- Ñ “Tell me about your complaint.”
- Ñ “Tell me how I can help you achieve your goals.”
- Ñ “What do I have to give you to get what I want?”
- Ñ “Describe how you think the project developed.”

Hypothetical Open Questions

These questions allow the partner in your conversation some flexibility and choice in deciding how to respond to an invented but possible situation. Since they are hypothetical, they give you, as interviewer or leader of the conversation, greater flexibility in designing a question to fit a particular situation. Here are some examples:

- Ñ “Let’s change roles for a moment. Suppose you were supervisor of this department and someone came to you with a complaint similar to yours. How would you like to handle it?”
- Ñ “If you learned a process or procedure that that could free up one hour of your time each week, what do you see yourself doing during that hour?”

Direct or Specific Questions

These are short questions requiring at least a short answer and may include a yes or no answer. They are valuable because they require limited answers, which can make it easier for some of your employees than trying to deal with a large number of open-ended questions. Here are some examples of direct questions:

- Ñ “Is the accusation against you accurate?”
- Ñ “Did you accomplish your top priority this year?”
- Ñ “Do you think you should receive a promotion?”

Closed Questions

Closed questions can be answered with a single word or two, such as a simple yes or no. They can begin the closing process in a conversation, or provide confirmation of a detail, but they don’t usually lead to a richer conversation or gathering more information. The advantage of closed questions is that they give

you control over the questions and the type of answers you receive. Closed questions are easy to interpret and more questions can be answered in less time.

However, closed questions don't allow for detailed explanations or for the other person to share how they feel about a particular circumstance. If you wish to encourage a richer response or to encourage a frustrated person to talk freely, then you need to avoid asking closed questions. Here are some examples of closed questions:

- Ñ “Does this make you angry?”
- Ñ “Do you think this appraisal is fair?”

To open up those same questions, you could try these open-ended statements:

- Ñ “Please explain how you feel about this situation.”
- Ñ “Tell me how you feel about this appraisal.”

Third-Person Questions

Embarrassing or personal questions may be phrased in a less threatening way by involving a third person. For example, instead of asking “Do you think the raise is fair?” the supervisor can ask, “Do the employees in our department think the raise is fair?”

You have to listen carefully to the answer to determine whether they reply using their own personal opinion (as is often the case, and is really what you are after.) You may need to ask some additional questions to more fully flesh out the information you are looking for.

Poor Questions

Here are some question types that you should be cautious of using.

Loaded Questions

These are questions that have no correct answer, and they usually elicit an emotional response. Loaded questions are not usually used by skilled interviewers because they can easily throw the conversation off track. They may even backfire on you. Some examples include:

- Ñ “Have you stopped drinking yet?”
- Ñ “Are you still difficult to get along with?”

Leading Questions

A leading question tells your conversation partner what you really want to hear in their answer. All that you learn by asking these questions is that the employee has figured out how to give you the answer that you want; the “correct” answer. Examples include:

- Ñ “I don’t think you’ve been working up to your potential. What do you think?”
- Ñ “You don’t mind helping Annie with her assignment, do you?”

Probing

When we do not get enough information by using open-ended questions, we can use probes to expand the conversation.

Verbal and Nonverbal Probes

A probe will encourage your conversation partner to add to their previous response. Verbal probes are often a single word or short phrase. Some examples are:

- Ñ “Tell me more about that.”
- Ñ “That’s interesting. Tell me more.”
- Ñ “Really?”
- Ñ “Why?”
- Ñ “Can you give me a specific example of what you mean?”

Nonverbal probes rely on your body language and gestures to get the same results as a verbal probe. Some examples are:

- Ñ Raising the eyebrows as if you are surprised
- Ñ Nodding
- Ñ Frowning
- Ñ Pursing the lips

Probing Techniques

There are many ways that you can use probing in your conversations. We’ve provided some techniques for you below.

1. Ask an **open question**, such as:
 - Ñ “Can you describe that more clearly?”
 - Ñ “Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?”
 - Ñ “What do you think we should do?”

You'll soon recognize that if you ask too many of these questions, your conversation partner will feel like they are under interrogation, so use them carefully.

2. **Pause.** Many of us feel uncomfortable when silence overtakes a conversation, and we will fill the silence by expanding on what was said previously.
3. **Use reflective or mirroring questions.** For example, if the employee says "I just don't feel challenged by my work anymore," you may respond by just reflecting back to them, "Challenged?" Then pause. Usually, the other person will provide you with an expanded answer without you asking more questions or interrogating. These kinds of statements also serve to focus or clarify and summarize without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They demonstrate your intent to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings.
4. **Paraphrase** what has just been said in your own words. "So if I understand you correctly, you..." Using this technique shows that you want to understand your conversation partner and that you want to be accurate. It also allows the sender to hear back what they have said from someone else's point of view.
5. **Summary questions** are a helpful way of probing and winding up the conversation at the same time. "You have spoken to your colleague about his foul language in the office, you have tried to ignore it, and you remain concerned about the impact his swearing has on our visitors and staff. None of these techniques have worked to reduce the amount of swearing and now you are asking me to intervene. Have I got it right?"

Here is another example: when we asked an employee why it would take until next week to finish the project, one of her reasons was lack of cooperation from the production department.

Rather than come back with yet another question, you might just say "Cooperation..." in a reflective tone of voice, and pause again. Usually, the other person will recognize that reflection as a clue to expand or provide you with additional information.

Summary statements or paraphrases sum up what has been said, and will show that you have listened and absorbed what's being said. Don't use them to take over the dialogue.

The summary is the stronger cue that the conversation is winding down on that topic. However, if necessary or appropriate, you can follow this up with a fact-finding question (usually a closed question), such as, "Did you want to say more about the issue?", or, "Do you have any other suggestions?"

Non-Verbal Messages

Non-verbal messages can be far more important than the words we say. The way we stand, what we do with our hands, the sound of our voice, the way we walk, and the expressions on our face can support, enhance, and even contradict what we say.

In our fast-paced world, we don't have time to get more than a quick snapshot of how a person looks before we make up our mind about them. They are making up their mind about us at the same time, so it is essential that our non-verbal messages are consistent with what we say verbally.

Remember that one important aspect of providing feedback is to encourage employees to learn and grow. If, for example, an employee gets a low rating on some aspect of a performance appraisal, and you as the supervisor notices the employee's flushed face or tight lips, but you do not make any observation about it (and the employee asks for no explanation), you are not likely to stimulate improvement. In an even worse case, you could see even less performance.

When we meet, what should we be watching for from our employees?

- Ñ Rejection of our comments (for example, the person physically moves further from us by sitting back in their chair or slouching in their seat)
- Ñ Anger on the face and in their posture
- Ñ Lack of understanding or comprehension (such as furrowed brows, pursed lips)

What are some other non-verbal signals we must be careful not to communicate to employees?

- Ñ Boredom (if you look like you're just going through the motions of yet another performance review, they will see it)
- Ñ Anger (our own flushed face, or the way we put things on our desk will all convey our own mood)
- Ñ Arrogance

The face and the eyes are the most expressive means of non-verbal communication. Additional positive or negative messages are sent by your gestures, posture, and the space between you and the other person.

Positive body language is important to encourage conversation and support your positive intent in meeting with the other person. When we don't pay attention to our non-verbal signals, we often send mixed or confusing messages to people. Get control of your image by working on your non-verbal language.

Managing Your Messages

What are some things that we need to consider about the following aspects of our body language?

Facial Expression

Smiling

Eye Contact

Body Language

Voice

Your attitude is projected through your voice as well as your body language. Make sure your body language and voice always says, "I'm here to help as best I can."

When your voice is annoyed, impatient, or condescending, the other person may become angered or angrier. Speak with a calm, firm, caring, soothing tone. Your communications will be more relaxed, more pleasant, and better understood.

The speed and rhythm of your speech is important as well. Clear communication includes appropriate pauses and inflections to support the words.

Qualities of a Good Voice

- Ñ Awake and interested
- Ñ A smile in your voice
- Ñ Straightforward language, without jargon
- Ñ Glad the person called or visited
- Ñ Easy to understand with moderate volume and rate
- Ñ Well-modulated, varied tone

Interpretation Exercise

Look at the images below. Determine what you think is happening in each of the illustrations and how you feel about it.

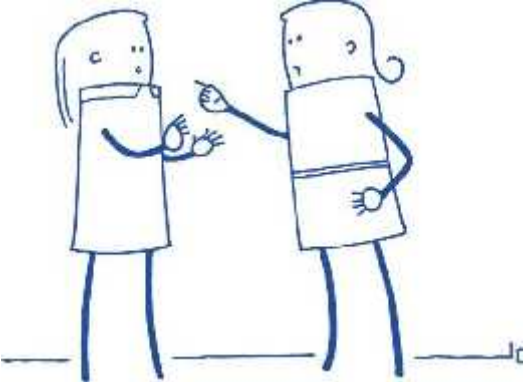
Image	What I Think is Happening	How I Feel About It
		





Image	What I Think is Happening	How I Feel About It
		
		
		

Image	What I Think is Happening	How I Feel About It
		

Characteristics of Effective Feedback

Six Characteristics

One goal of feedback is for it to contribute to an improvement in future performance. Even when it does not lead to a desired level of performance, the meeting itself provides the platform to discuss expectations, results, motivation, and how to succeed. For employees (or even suppliers) who choose not to perform at an adequate level, the meeting serves as a benchmark within the larger performance management arena. If an employee refuses to comply, has been supported and coached to do well, and continues to refuse, then the supervisor has the necessary means to move into a disciplinary performance management plan.

When feedback is perceived to be negative (because of our own behavior, or perhaps because it is not well delivered), people will naturally try to avoid it, or at least minimize the negative effects. However, we need to let people know that it can be a great tool for personal development, especially when we include information on both the issues and the possible solutions. With this in mind, let's delve deeper into the six major characteristics of effective feedback.

In Private

Feedback should be given in private if your comments can be embarrassing, and a formal feedback meeting should always be held in private. While some people like the attention that comes from sincere

praise or celebrating an accomplishment in front of others, some do not, and no one wants negativity shared in front of their peers. (This should be apparent without having to state it, but sometimes we get excited and forget!)

Balanced

Balance in this context is about designing the feedback session so that, even though there may be constructive criticism required, the employee does not feel attacked, or that all you have to say about his work is negative. We recommend that you avoid the older form of “sandwich approach” (by making a positive comment, a negative, and then a positive). However, you should still start any feedback with a positive comment about some aspect of the employee’s work. If you are not comfortable with this, or not good at small talk, write some comments down ahead of time to keep yourself focused. Your employee will appreciate that you get to the heart of the meeting quickly instead of letting any anxiety build. Feedback that is delivered in specific terms and in a sincere manner is usually accepted well, even when we are receiving criticism.

Relevant

Keep the conversation focused on feedback that is relevant and job related, and to things which the employee has control over. For example, complaining about the way a letter looks when the employee only has access to an ancient printer that adds lines to everything, or asking for a sophisticated looking brochure when there is no budget provided for the proper paper and licensed photography, only adds to the employee’s stress and frustration.

Specific

Avoid general statements when you deliver feedback. “You seem unmotivated,” is not nearly as helpful as, “You arrived late to work at least three days a week, your last two assignments were late, and you did not attend the new employee lunch last week.”

Documented

Base your comments on documentation, facts, and your own observation. Don’t rely on what another manager or a colleague told you, or what someone overheard, when you should be available to monitor what is going on yourself.

Personal (In the Right Way)

Compliments or criticisms that are directed generally toward the team are meaningless to an employee. “We just don’t seem able to get out error-free invoices,” is not as constructive as, “Three of the last

invoices you sent out had errors in them.” Describe the behavior that is unsatisfactory, rather than judge a person because of it. Base it on their actions, and don’t make a personal attack on the individual.

Formal Feedback Framework

Establishing a formal feedback session is practically the same as any other meeting you will arrange. Here is a helpful framework when providing formal feedback, such as in a performance review or in a sit-down meeting with a supplier or contractor.

Set the Time and Place

Be mindful of other people’s expectations (as well as your own) for privacy. No one wants to be criticized in front of their peers, but even if you are offering praise, some people prefer it privately. Any kind of formal performance appraisal, a discussion on expectations, or constructive criticism, needs to be offered privately.

We recommend that you keep this meeting short and focused. There is no need to schedule an hour meeting for something that can be covered in a shorter time. On the other hand, if you expect that the individual will have thoughts to share, make sure you allow ample time for this.

Consider the employee’s schedule, too. Don’t schedule the meeting thirty minutes before you know they have to go and catch a bus, or right before you have to deliver an important presentation.

Prepare Documentation

If this is a formal performance evaluation, you may have a form that your employer prefers. Otherwise, you need to have data available for the individual to back up what you have to say. Keep in mind that positive data and results are important, too.

Start the Meeting

Keep the tone of the meeting professional and polite. Even if you are upset about something, the meeting needs to be conducted properly. Remember, no one wants to work with a tyrant for an employer. Use the six characteristics of effective feedback during the meeting.

Outline the Change or Offer Praise

After a little small talk, move onto the purpose of the meeting and your feedback. If the feedback is positive, be genuine in your praise. If possible, demonstrate improvement from the last meeting. If changes or improvements are needed, engage in discussion with open questions. Ask the individual for their thoughts on what they can do differently and get the commitment to change. In order to avoid overwhelming the individual, ask them to work on no more than two or three improvements at one time.

Round the conversation out by complimenting them on their positive results (no one does everything poorly), attitude, commitment, and anything else that is suitable.

Check for Understanding

Ask the individual to summarize what you have said so that you know they understand. Watch for people's tendency to focus on negative attributes; ask them to also recap the positives if necessary.

Follow Up

This is the step that many people miss, but it's an essential part of the feedback framework. If you say that you will follow up with the employee in ten days to check in and see how things are coming along, make sure that you do. Lack of follow up on your part will make it look as though you don't really care about helping the employee to succeed. It will also negatively impact levels of trust and employee engagement.

If you have an employee who is not succeeding despite receiving feedback and coaching from you, and you neglect to follow up with them, it can be perceived that you are condoning the unwanted behavior or that you do not take performance management seriously. If you persistently condone poor or substandard workplace behavior, you make it extremely difficult to move onto disciplinary measures in the future.

Informal Feedback Framework

Informal feedback will be offered in a way that is very similar to formal feedback, except that you will likely only focus on one topic, and you do not need all that documentation that a performance appraisal or similar formal meeting requires. Data is still helpful however, and appreciated by people who need to have a solid understanding of where you are coming from.

The framework for an informal meeting can look like this:

- Ñ Set the time and place (if it is not a spontaneous meeting)
- Ñ Start the meeting
- Ñ Outline the change or offer praise
- Ñ Check for understanding
- Ñ Document if appropriate (depending on the nature of the conversation, this may not be required)
- Ñ Follow up

State Your Case

Instructions

Each of the following situations is one in which you can provide feedback. In your groups, review each example and then come to consensus on whether you will provide feedback that is formal or informal (including the rationale for your choice). Then, if you have decided to provide feedback, prepare at least two constructive feedback statements based on what you have learned so far. Be prepared to share your answers with the rest of the class.

Scenario One: Howard the Warehouse Worker

Howard works in the warehouse and used to have no problem picking all new work orders within 24 hours. However, in the last several months he seems to be spending a lot of time on the phone as he moves about the warehouse, and he is falling behind. Orders are now being filled on average within 30 hours.

Good Feedback Statements

Poor Feedback Statements

Scenario Two: Task Improvements

Four months ago you completed formal performance reviews with your ten direct reports. For the most part, things seem to be going quite well. One of your staff has developed a new work process that has helped the team to increase their time for task completion by 4%. This translates to an increased profit of \$75,000 per quarter.

Good Feedback Statements

Poor Feedback Statements

Scenario Three: Tardy Supplier

One of your consistent, reliable suppliers has recently changed his delivery times, dropping off building supplies at 4:00 p.m. instead of his previous 7:00 a.m. time. In the last week, you've been unable to supply your own customers on time because of this change in his delivery schedule.

Good Feedback Statements

Poor Feedback Statements

Scenario Four: The Break Room

Of the 100 staff working out of your location, most are quite diligent about leaving the break room clean and tidy after they use it. Yesterday and the day before, however, people left their dirty dishes in the sink. You know who the culprits are, since their names are labeled on their lunch containers. You are furious that they would behave this way.

Good Feedback Statements

Poor Feedback Statements

Scenario Five: The Copy Technician

The photocopier technician appeared one day to say there was a recall on a part for your copier and he was going to replace it. He completed the work quickly and with minimal downtime. A few days later, three of the staff comment that the machine seems faster than usual, and that it has not jammed since the technician was in.

Good Feedback Statements

Poor Feedback Statements

Pre-Assignment Review

Review the feedback statements in your pre-assignment. Find ways to improve them by applying the skills that you have learned in the course so far.

Original Statement	Improved Statement

Receiving Feedback Graciously

Accepting criticism from others can be really difficult. We often hear criticism as a very personal attack on behavior that we already may not be proud of. It helps to think about criticism as feedback and as something to help you improve. This is what we refer to as **positive intent**.

While you may hesitate in doing this, it can be an outstanding opportunity for you to grow. It also means that you are going to follow up a feedback session by asking the other individual if your feedback was helpful, sensitive to their needs, and respectful.

Here are some tips on accepting criticism.

Listen attentively.

Make sure you understand the criticism and what needs improvement. You may even want to paraphrase the other person's remarks.

Ask for details.

Find out as much as you can about the incident(s) described. Ask lots of open ended questions to gather all the information that you can.

Find something to agree with.

You don't need to say that you were wrong if you weren't, but it does do a lot for your own integrity for you to say that you were wrong if you were. Of equal importance, you need to acknowledge the person's right to criticize and to recognize the importance of the person's concerns. If you cannot agree with the other person about any aspect of the criticism being offered, you could be perceived as rejecting the person as well.

Try not to take their comments personally.

If they've learned anything about offering feedback, they will know they need to speak to your behaviors and not your personal self, but not everyone knows this. Consider that they are being brave and offering feedback (not an easy thing for most people to do) as an opportunity to improve yourself.

