



The Art of Effective Feedback

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The Art of Effective Feedback

In GAO we spend a good deal of time reviewing and analyzing all kinds of information:

- How many staff days do my engagements usually take and how does that compare to the average for GAO?
- How might I better leverage available resources to complete this project on time?
- What is our mission team's current production level (reports, testimonies, and briefings) and how can we free up resources to work on congressional requests in the queue?

Analyzing data, developing findings and conclusions, and making recommendations for improvement constitute our job. But we rarely invest the same level of effort and attention to evaluating GAO's most important asset—the performance of staff. Effective feedback requires the same attention to detail and precision that you use in conducting an engagement.

Creating and delivering a specific message based on observed performance is key to effective feedback. When you tell an intern, a coworker, or even your boss that he is a good leader, or that she communicates well, or that he needs to be more strategic, you may believe that you have provided helpful feedback. But these statements only evaluate or interpret. They don't **describe behavior in a sufficiently specific way that a person can learn and develop by repeating or avoiding that behavior.**

Effective feedback enables the receiver to walk away understanding EXACTLY what he or she did and the impact that it had on you and/or the situation. The more specific, direct, and timely you are in providing

feedback, the more likely it is that the person receiving the feedback will be motivated to change.

Think about statements that coworkers, supervisors, or subordinates have made to you about your performance. How many times have you wished that their feedback was more timely, more specific, and offered clear examples of what you should or shouldn't have done?

By the end of this guide you will be able to:

- give the kind of feedback that you would like to get,
- give feedback that accurately represents your thoughts without blame or judgment,
- become more conscious of actual behavior and the message that it sends to others,
- increase your awareness of the emotional responses you have to the actions of others, and
- improve your ability to elicit more effective feedback that you can use for your own professional development and growth.

Feedback Begins with Expectations

In a comedy routine from the 1970s Lily Tomlin played a precocious and mischievous six-year-old called Edith Ann who complained, "Nobody ever told me that I shouldn't shave the kitty." While adults rarely set out to get themselves in trouble, they can do so nonetheless if no one has ever explained what is expected of them, why these expectations are important, or the consequences of failing to meet certain expectations. Too often we expect people to "just know these things." But unless we have made our expectations clear, it is unlikely that others will be able to read our silent

thoughts, to anticipate the assumptions we make, or to somehow know just what they are supposed to do in situations they have never encountered before.

So, before you embark on the process of giving feedback, ask yourself, did you—or anyone else—consciously and purposefully set the ground rules of what is expected? It is considerably easier and more pleasant to rehearse with someone what you hope that person will do in the future than it is to cause that person to unlearn something that he or she has done in the past.

Ten Common Mistakes in Giving Feedback

Why is it so hard to give or get effective feedback? Many people avoid it because they find it hard to do; they are afraid they will say something they will regret; they dread the prospect that people will get emotional when they hear things they don't like; they are concerned that they may jeopardize a work relationship. While these concerns are valid, they stem from common mistakes that people make in giving feedback.

- 1 ***The feedback judges individuals, not actions.*** Probably the number-one mistake in giving feedback is to put it in judgmental terms. When you say, "You were too abrasive" or "You need to be a better team player," you send a strong message about what you think is "right" or "wrong" and that you have judged this person as falling short of your expectations. Judgmental feedback puts people on the defensive. By the time the words are out of your mouth, the recipient is wondering, "Who do you think you are to call me abrasive?" The energy spent defending against your attack defeats the chance of a useful conversation.

- 2 ***The feedback is too vague.*** Generalized, clichéd phrases like “you did a great job on the presentation,” or “you showed good common sense,” may make the recipients happy, but they still won’t have any idea what exactly they did to earn your praise. If you want to encourage people to repeat productive behavior, you have to let them know exactly what it was that they did so that they can keep doing it!

- 3 ***The feedback speaks for others.*** Quoting a third party, as in “Ted said that you seem confused about your role as an AIC,” or “people are telling me that you’re micromanaging them,” is not effective feedback. At best, the recipient will wonder where people got that notion and just who is talking about them behind their back. At worst, he or she may be embarrassed that the comment came through you, a third party, and resent coworkers for making it in the first place. Again, the recipient is likely to become defensive and unable to hear your feedback.

- 4 ***Negative feedback gets sandwiched between positive messages.*** Many of us think that if we bracket bad news with good news it somehow takes the sting out of the message. What actually happens is that the recipient filters out the two positive messages and focuses on the negative message in the middle. When you need to combine both positive and negative feedback in a single session, such as discussing what you liked or did not like about a report draft, be very clear up front that there were things that you liked about the report draft and things that warrant revision. Next, walk the person through the draft and discuss the specific things you liked and why (e.g., the organization was clear and logical) and things that you would like them to revise (e.g., you need to include all the elements of a finding

in this paragraph.) This way you can focus on both the behaviors you want people to continue and the things that they need to do differently.

Examples of Effective Feedback	Examples of Ineffective Feedback
<i>As currently organized, the report draft did not flow well for me. Let's sit down and discuss different organizational formats that might better show case your findings.</i>	<i>This just isn't what I was looking for. Try again. I'll know it when I see it.</i>
<i>My expectation for interview write-ups is that they are 98 percent complete when you submit them to your supervisor. Whenever possible, you should track down missing information and include it in your write up. Also, take the time to proof the final version for grammar and typographical errors.</i>	<i>Why are your interview writeups always incomplete? They look like you didn't even try to organize them.</i>
<i>Your briefing to the requester's staff was very concise, provided the appropriate amount of detail, and responded specifically to each of their questions.</i>	<i>You did a great job briefing the requester's staff.</i>

- 5 The feedback is exaggerated with generalities.** Another mistake is using "always" or "never." Since none of us are that consistent, the recipients get defensive since they can remember lots of times when they did not do what you claim they did.
- 6 The feedback psychoanalyzes the motives behind the behavior.** Telling someone that you know why he or she is behaving in a particular way is apt to trigger strong resistance. You may imagine what might lead you to act in a particular way but you have no way of knowing the intents and motives of someone else. Feedback that goes to motive is likely to cause resentment.

- 7 ***The feedback goes on too long or is too late.***
Sometimes, when we give others feedback, we don't know when to stop. We expand on feedback by giving advice, describing personal experiences, and trying to solve the other person's problem. Recipients need time to digest and assimilate the information they receive without all this extra baggage. The other mistake is to "save up" feedback for such a long time that it comes out in a burst and is far too late to enable the recipient to make any changes. Feedback that has been waiting for a long time can seem much more harsh than a more timely comment.

- 8 ***The feedback contains an implied threat.***
Telling people that their rating or future is in jeopardy or asking such questions as "Don't you want to succeed?" neither reinforces good behavior nor illustrates bad behavior. It only creates animosity.

- 9 ***The feedback uses inappropriate humor.*** If giving feedback makes you uncomfortable, or if you sometimes speak before thinking, you might use sarcasm as a substitute for feedback. Saying "thanks for joining us" to a colleague who is 15 minutes late for a video teleconference doesn't tell that person how their behavior affected you or the team, nor does it provide reasons to change that behavior.

- 10 ***The feedback is a question, not a statement.***
Phrasing feedback as a question ("Do you think you can pay more attention on the next interview?") is too indirect to be effective. Questions may also come across as sarcastic or rhetorical, in which case they may be ignored.

Developing Effective Feedback Skills

You can avoid common feedback mistakes by learning how to communicate with subordinates, peers, and superiors in a way that

- helps them hear what you are saying and
- helps them identify what specifically they can do to improve

Using a form of feedback called Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI, for short) you can deliver feedback that avoids personal attack, interpretation, vague statements, and thirdparty comments with direct, clear, and objective observations on a person's actions. Receiving SBI feedback, the recipient can more easily see what actions he or she can take to continue and improve performance or to change behavior that is ineffective or impairs their performance.

The SBI technique is effective and simple. When giving feedback you:

- describe the specific situation (and when it occurred),
- describe the behavior you observed, and
- explain the impact the behavior had on you.

SBI is simple, direct, and effective—but you have to practice!

Set the Stage

When you approach someone to offer feedback, request permission. "May I share an observation with you?" This open approach can ease anxiety and set the stage for a conversation, rather than a confrontation.

To create more receptivity to the entire notion of feedback, ask for permission to give feedback, say something positive, ask the person if he or she understands what behavior you are talking about, then stop talking and walk away. A positive approach can ease the reflexive fear many people have when they hear the word “feedback.”

Capture the Situation

The first step in giving effective feedback is to capture and clarify the specific situation in which the behavior occurred. By saying, “on Tuesday, just before the team meeting with Carol and Fred,” rather than “a couple of days ago at the office with some people,” you avoid the vague comments and exaggerations that torpedo so many feedback efforts. Describing the location and time of a behavior creates context and helps recipients better remember their thinking and behavior at the time.

Here are some examples of how you might capture the situation as your first step:

- “Yesterday morning while we were talking to agency officials after the entrance conference...”
- “Last Monday, after lunch, while we were walking with Cindy to the meeting...”
- “Today, first thing this morning, when you and I were chatting at the Xerox machine, you said...”
- “This past Friday, after our video teleconference with the San Francisco office, when we were discussing the access issue...”

Specificity is critical when recalling a situation. The more specifics and details you can use to bring the situation to mind, the sharper and clearer your message will be.

Describe the Behavior

Describing the behavior in question is the second step to giving effective feedback. It's both the most crucial step (and the one most often omitted) because behavior can be difficult to identify and describe. The most common mistake in giving feedback happens when judgments are communicated using adjectives that describe a person but not a person's actions. Unhelpful adjectives include the following examples:

- "He was rude during the meeting."
- "She was clearly interested in the discussion."
- "She seemed bored and disinterested during ..."
- "He was unwilling to hear ..."

All the above phrases describe the observer's impression or interpretation of a behavior, not the behavior itself. Contrast the impressions below with the behavior that led to these interpretations.

Behavior	Impression/interpretation
He repeatedly interrupted each of the other team members	Rude
She leaned forward, jotted down notes as others spoke, and contributed her thoughts as they built on other's comments	Interested
She yawned, rolled her eyes, and stared out the window throughout the session	Bored

Look over the following list. Put a check next to each phrase that describes behavior.

overconfident
aggressive
needs to be less tactical and more strategic
arrogant
analytical and very logical in his/her approach
good team player who cares about the people on the team
extremely productive
excellent all-around leader
decisive.

If you didn't check any items, then you're right on track. None of the phrases in the list describes a behavior. Behaviors are actions that people take. These are only adjectives that describe the person, but not the actions that they have taken.

The key to successfully describing behavior is to focus on the actions themselves, not on a judgment as to what the behavior might mean. If you remember to use verbs when describing behavior, you can avoid the adjectives of judgment. In order for someone to understand and act on your feedback, you need to capture not only what people do, but how they do it.

A new Director who stands in front of the team and says, "I'm so excited to have the chance to work with all of you" will appear insincere if she has no expression on her face, speaks in a flat voice, and uses no hand gestures. So when giving people SBI feedback, you must not only capture what is said or done, but how it is said and done. You can capture the how by paying attention

to body language, tone of voice, word choice, and timing.

Body language is nonverbal communication and can include facial expressions, eye movement, body posture, and hand gestures. For example:

Jim was becoming increasingly irritated with Alice during their meeting. Alice frequently tapped her foot, shifted in her seat repeatedly, kept checking her watch and nodded her head at people as they passed by her cubicle while they were talking.

Although Alice never spoke, she sent loud and clear messages through her body language. Jim can begin to give Alice effective feedback by saying:

"Alice, during our meeting yesterday morning in your cubicle I noticed that you looked at your watch several times during the 15 minutes I was there. You tapped your foot and shifted from side to side in your seat. You also nodded your head at people passing by while I was asking you about your most recent interviews."

In the above example, Jim has communicated the situation and many clear instances of behavior. His approach will help Alice understand the impact of her behavior when Jim gets to the final step in the feedback process.

Tone of voice and speaking manner relate to the pitch of a person's voice, the speed and volume at which they speak, and the pauses used when speaking. While these can sometimes be hard to pinpoint and describe, they can be useful in sorting our effective and ineffective behavior. For example:

Jason is making a business case for contracting with an outside expert to consult on scientific issues

relating to the engagement. During his presentation he pauses on at least six different occasions, halting in mid-sentence. After these pauses, his voice slows down considerably. He speaks in a low monotone. When people ask him questions, he suddenly speaks very fast. As he wraps up, he speaks much more loudly and in a rush.

These behaviors may lead to the impression that Jason is uncertain, nervous, hesitant, not a good presenter. But to say just that to him won't help him develop. Effective feedback must include a description of Jason's speaking manner. You need to point out how he presented the material—the pauses, the tone, the volume of his voice—as well as his body language.

"Jason, during your presentation yesterday, you stopped several times and spoke so low that it was difficult for me to hear you. Then, toward the end of your presentation, when people asked questions, you spoke faster and your voice got louder. The way you presented your case made me feel that you weren't well prepared and lacked confidence in your business case. The way you spoke faster at the end made me feel like you were in a rush to get out of the room."

A person's choice of words can often have an inordinate impact on others. As someone giving feedback, it helps to jot down what someone has said so that you can remember it as accurately as possible.

"Bob, during the team meeting this morning you repeatedly said, 'If it hadn't been for Ted, we'd have been done with this work by now,' in front of the whole group. I was really uncomfortable that you singled out one person and put all the blame on Ted. After hearing that, I really wondered about your willingness or commitment to working together on his team."

Describe the Impact

The final step in the SBI feedback process is to convey the impact of the behavior in question. If the behavior itself describes the “what,” the impact is the explanation of “so what.” The impact may have been on you, on the organization, on coworkers, on a program, on a customer, or on any other third party. There are two options when talking about the impact of someone’s behavior.

1. You can evaluate or make a judgment about the person’s behavior. “I thought you showed interest when you asked for the group’s input.” While common, this is the less effective approach since the recipient can argue about your interpretation of their behavior.
2. You can acknowledge the effect the behavior had personally on you. “When you told me in the meeting ... I felt you dismissed my concerns.” “When you kept interrupting the other team members they shut down and stopped contributing. I wanted to hear what they had to say.” “When you sent the communication forward without giving me a chance to make any input, I couldn’t offer you the background information you needed.” This approach is the more effective of the two since it is direct and personally valid.

By communicating the personal impact a behavior has had on you (or others), you are sharing a point of view and asking your recipient to acknowledge it. That kind of direct and personal communication ultimately helps build trust. To practice the impact stage of performance feedback follow this formula:

- When you did (state the behavior), I felt (state the impact)

- When you (state the action), I was (state the impact)

Here's some examples of the entire SBI sequence with the impact statement underlined.

“Sophie, this morning in your office, when you took the time to review with me the message we are trying to develop and the connection with the interview questions I planned to ask, it helped me understand how I contributed to our product.”

“Matt, in the meeting this morning on our program plans for next year, you kept your voice at an even tone, even when the boss questioned your numbers. Your ability to provide numbers, examples, and the logic behind our recommendations gave me confidence that you had really prepared.”

“Janice, you have not responded to any of the last four e-mails I've sent you about our plans for the team brown-bag sessions. I feel ignored and wonder if you see any value in this.”

Stay on Message

Once you make the effort to provide effective feedback, don't detract from the message! Even if you follow the proper SBI format, you can lessen the value of feedback if you:

- Back out of the feedback you give. “You interrupted me, which made me feel angry, but the more I think about it, it was pretty hectic at the time.” Retracting or dismissing what you just said only confuses the message. It's better to state a clear message and then just stop. You can ask about contributing conditions later.

- **Insert your own experiences.** “I remember when I once...” By saying this, you absolve the recipient of responsibility for their own behavior. It’s better to stay focused on the situation, the behavior, and the impact. Feedback is about the choices that the other person has made.
- **Pretend to know what the receiver is experiencing or thinking.** “I used to have the same problem and I...” It’s more helpful to ask questions about what the other person was thinking or experiencing.
- **Cushion your feedback by pre-categorizing it.** “I know that you’re not going to like hearing this...” This only puts the receiver on the defensive. It’s more effective to stay focused on the behavior, not your characterization of the behavior.
- **Label your feedback.** “I have some negative feedback to give you...” Saying something like this just creates undue anxiety, and the recipient may tune out your message. Corrective feedback can be enormously helpful and beneficial.
- **Label the behavior as a problem.** “You have a problem getting your interview write ups in on time.”
- **Delay your feedback.** The sooner you give feedback about the behavior involved, the better your memory of the event and the more likely that the receiver can remember it as well. Delay too long and the recipient will wonder why you didn’t bring it up at the time. The longer you delay, the more apt you are to give feedback as a blast, rather than a measured, objective commentary.

It's OKAY to acknowledge uneasiness or discomfort you may feel when giving a person feedback since that person will notice it anyway. Just remember that feedback is not about you, it's about helping the other person to become aware of the impact of their behavior and the range of choices they have in how they present themselves.

Put It All Together¹

The Dozen Do's

1. Be specific when describing the situation
2. Be specific when describing the behavior
3. Acknowledge the impact on *you*
4. Judge the behavior
5. Pay attention to body language
6. Use verbatim quotes
7. Recreate the behavior, if appropriate
8. Give feedback in a timely manner
9. Give your feedback, check for understanding, then STOP
10. Say "I felt" or "I was" to frame your impact statement
11. Focus on a single message
12. Be sensitive to the emotional impact of your feedback

The Dozen Don'ts

1. Assume
2. Be vague
3. Use accusations
4. Judge the person
5. Pass along vague feedback from others
6. Give advice unless asked
7. Psychoanalyze
8. Qualify your feedback by backing out
9. Use examples from your own experience
10. Generalize with words like "always" or "never"
11. Label your feedback in advance
12. Sandwich your feedback message with words like "but"

¹The advice in this guide comes from the research and educational experience of the Center for Creative Leadership. CCL has demonstrated the value of effective feedback as a component of leadership development.