

Constructive Feedback

One of a leader's responsibilities is to create and utilize a forum for open, constructive communication in which feedback is one important aspect. Feedback is communicating to a member or group how their behavior has affected us or other people.

Effective feedback can (1) be heard by the receiver; (2) keeps the relationship intact, open and healthy; and (3) validates the feedback process in future interactions. Effective feedback, both positive and negative, is helpful to others. When you give feedback you are offering valuable information that will be useful to another person making decisions about how to behave. Feedback is not criticism. Criticism is evaluative; feedback is descriptive. It also allows us to build and maintain communication with others. Feedback provides the individual with information that can be used in performing personal evaluation.

Characteristics of Effective Feedback

1. It is specific rather than general. To be told that one is "dominating" will probably not be as useful as to be told, "You were not listening to what the others said, but I felt I had to agree with your arguments or face attack from you."
2. It is focused on behavior rather than on the person. It is important that we refer to what a person does rather than to what we think or imagine he/she is.
3. It takes into account the needs of the receiver of the feedback. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only your own needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. It should be given to help, not to hurt. It is directed toward behavior which the receiver can do something about.
4. It is solicited, rather than imposed. Feedback is most useful when the receiver has formulated the kind of question to which those observing can respond.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. It involves the amount of information the receiver can use rather than the amount we would like to give. To overload people 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.

8. 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 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 “really” means, what 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.

9. 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 misinformation.