

Giving Feedback

When many of us hear the words, “May I give you some feedback?” we get a pit in our stomach and brace for the worst. We fear feedback, afraid that someone might have caught us not being perfect. We’re afraid that our cover has been blown. We’re scared that we’re being judged or unfairly criticized.

This is especially true in law firms. Lawyers are generally uncomfortable giving constructive feedback and the potential conflict that often comes with it. In many firms, feedback comes in the form of an annual review for staff and attorneys, which has limited effectiveness to identify and correct behavior and often leads to resentment on the part of the receiver of the feedback (i.e., “If I screwed up that bad, why didn’t you tell me last January instead of waiting to tell me *now*?”)

That’s too bad, because constructive, intentional and structured feedback is a powerful tool to improve individual and team performance. When I was the Director of Marketing for an Amlaw 200 firm, I hired a consultant to work with our marketing team on improving team performance. When we met, we discussed dozens of training topics and team exercises that we could do at our retreat. When I asked him what skill would have the greatest impact on our performance as a team, he replied, “without a doubt, the ability to give and receive feedback from each other.” He led our retreat on the theme, giving us many opportunities to practice performance-enhancing feedback. At the end of the retreat, we discussed the power of giving feedback and what would happen if we gave each other permission to engage in feedback conversations. As a group, we agreed to adopt this as a core value, realizing that while it is hard to give and receive feedback, we all gain from helping each other improve our performance. We decided that feedback is a gift that we’ll give to each other.

The goal of feedback is improved performance. Teams committed to giving honest, constructive, thoughtful, feedback are intelligent, self-correcting and constantly improving their individual and team performance. They are more engaged in their work and they enjoy deeper relationships with each other.

When a team agrees to giving and receiving performance-based feedback, they assume responsibility for group performance. While it is still hard to give feedback, it is easier to approach the issue because everyone has agreed to it beforehand.

There are two kinds of feedback – constructive feedback and positive feedback. We’ll first look at how to give constructive feedback.

1. Choose the right time - Try to give feedback as soon as possible after the behavior is observed. Give yourself and the other person time to cool off, if emotions are running high.
2. Consider location carefully – What message are you sending if you have the conversation in your office with you seated at your desk? Would the receiver be more open to feedback in his or her office, or a conference room? Constructive feedback is best given in private.
3. Check your energy – are you rested and prepared to think clearly and control your emotions? If not, when would be a better time to give your full attention to the

- conversation? If you feel a need to vent your emotions, find a colleague who is willing to confidentially listen to you. Calm your mind. Approach with an attitude of helpfulness, not resentment or superiority.
4. Reflect – People perceive things differently and interpret situations, behaviors and attitudes through a lens of their personal history, background and bias. Understand where you are coming from and where you think the recipient is coming from. What are your real reasons for giving feedback? Are they to improve individual or team performance, or are you expressing judgment, opinion or acting out your own issues?
 5. Create your message ahead of time. Focus on specific and observable behaviors, not opinions, hearsay or judgments. Write out the specific behavior that you (or others) observed and how the behavior affects you, your team or the firm. Focus on their actions, not the person. Be clear about what behavior you expect to change. Avoid judgmental and defensive statements. Express concern. Be sincere. Ignore behavior that should be ignored. Focus on the behavior that is hindering the individual's or team's progress. Don't mix messages: don't give positive feedback before negative feedback, or negative feedback with positive feedback. Appreciation is different than positive feedback.
 6. Ask for permission to give feedback. If they decline, identify why and find a way to address the issue. Asking for permission gives the receiver a sense of control over the process.
 7. Show genuine appreciation first – thank them for something you appreciate and recognize their contribution to the team. Look them in the eye and be straightforward. Deliver your message. Don't waiver. Listen to what they have to say. Engage in dialogue on expectations, challenges and possible solutions. Identify resources that could help the receiver. Offer support, but don't take ownership for their issues. Develop positive steps to solution that is acceptable to both of you. Agree on a solution.
 8. End well – constructive feedback is not a hit and run conversation. Give hope and show them a path to success. Help them understand the positive consequences of behavior change. After the feedback session, make an extra effort to catch the person correcting the behavior, and give them positive feedback in the moment.

In comparison, giving positive feedback is a piece of cake. Giving positive feedback to reinforce desired behaviors and shared values is much more effective than correcting undesired behavior, but both are necessary for health team performance.

Give positive feedback “in-the-moment” or as close to the observed behavior as possible. Unlike negative feedback, it is OK to give positive feedback in public, but be sensitive to the person receiving the feedback and the other people in the audience. Giving constructive feedback is usually an occasional occurrence, but giving positive feedback can and should be a daily exercise.

Like constructive feedback, it is important to be clear and specific about the behavior you are reinforcing. Explain why the behavior contributes to the success of the team and the firm. Don't play favorites. Try to catch people doing things right – especially those things that reinforce shared values.

Constructive and positive feedback takes practice and patience. It takes time to overcome the fear that comes with giving and receiving feedback. Emotionally intelligent teams that practice feedback with the goal of mutual self-improvement, however, enjoy a powerful tool that builds confidence, teamwork and engagement.

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