

Receiving and giving feedback: Strategies for optimizing the feedback dialogue

We are continually receiving and giving feedback. Whether explicit through feedback dialogue, or implicit in gestures or tone of voice; feedback conveys information about behaviours and offers an evaluation of the quality of those behaviours. While it is easy to take feedback personally, strive to perceive it as a learning opportunity. Feedback can reinforce existing strengths, suggest desired goal-directed behaviours, clarify the effects of behaviour, and increase recipients' abilities to detect and remedy errors on their own. Use the tips below to receive and give feedback more effectively and optimize the feedback dialogue.

Giving effective feedback

Prioritize your ideas. Limit your feedback to the most important issues. Consider the feedback's potential value to the receiver and how you would respond – could you act on the feedback? As well, too much feedback provided at a single time can be overwhelming to the recipient.

- **Establish a respectful learning environment.** A positive learning environment is key for effective feedback conversations. Emphasize the importance of a learning partnership and growth mindset. Key concepts include that both teacher and learner are working together to achieve desired outcomes and learning from each other.
- **Concentrate on the behaviour, not the person.** One strategy is to open by stating the behaviour in question, describing the impact of the behavior, and ending with the desired outcome. This model enables you to avoid sounding accusatory by using “I” and focusing on behaviours, instead of assumed interpretations. Example: “I noticed you cut off the nurse giving you report this morning. I’m worried you could be missing important information. Can we meet to discuss this after clinic today?” Instead of: “You obviously don’t respect nurses through your belittling remarks!”
- **Be specific.** Avoid general comments that may be of limited use to the receiver. Try to include examples to illustrate your statement. As well, offering alternatives rather than just giving advice allows the receiver to decide what to do with your feedback.
- **Be realistic.** Feedback should focus on what can be changed. It is useless and frustrating for recipients to get comments on something over which they have no control. Also, remember to avoid using the words “always” and “never.” People’s behaviour is rarely that consistent.
- **Own the feedback.** When offering evaluative comments, use the pronoun “I” rather than “they”, which would imply that your opinion is universally agreed on. Remember feedback is merely your opinion.
- **Be timely.** Seek an appropriate time to communicate your feedback. Being prompt is key since feedback loses its impact if delayed too long. Delayed feedback can also cause feelings of resentment in the recipient if the opportunity for improvement has passed. If your feedback is critical, take time to prepare what you will say or write.
- **Offer continuing support.** Feedback should be a continuous process, not a one-time event. After offering feedback, make a conscious effort to follow up. Let recipients know you are available if they have questions. Plan opportunities to provide more feedback in the future.
- **Build rapport.** Ask learner permission to initiate a feedback conversation, ensure the setting supports confidentiality, thank them for their commitment to learning, and allowing you to share your feedback.

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Receiving feedback effectively

Although receiving feedback effectively is crucial to improving performance, even seemingly trivial suggestions can leave us feeling hurt, anxious, or badly treated. Key is recognizing and managing our emotional responses and being open to consider suggestions for future improvements.

- **Listen to the feedback given.** This means not interrupting. Hear the person out, and listen to what they are really saying, not what you assume they will say. You can absorb more information if you are concentrating on listening and understanding rather than being defensive and focusing on your response.
- **Be aware of your responses.** Your body language and tone of voice often speak louder than words. Try to avoid putting up barriers. If you look distracted and bored, that sends a negative message. Attentiveness, indicates that you value what someone has to say and puts both of you at ease.
- **Be open.** This means being receptive to new ideas and different opinions. Often, there is more than one way of doing something and others may have a completely different viewpoint on a given topic. You may learn something worthwhile.
- **Understand the message.** Make sure you understand what is being said to you, especially before responding to the feedback. Ask questions for clarification if necessary. Listen actively by repeating key points so that you know you have interpreted the feedback correctly. When possible, be explicit as to what kind of feedback you are seeking beforehand so you are not taken by surprise.
- **Reflect and decide what to do.** Assess the value of the feedback, the consequences of using it or ignoring it, and then decide what to do because of it. Your response is your choice. If you disagree with the feedback, consider asking for a second opinion from someone else.
- **Build rapport.** Giving and receiving feedback involves risk taking and try to frame critical feedback as a gift. Thank your teacher or colleague for taking the time to provide information on your performance along with their commitment to future progress.
- **Embrace your commitment to learning and a growth mindset.** A commitment to improving your performance is an inherent characteristic of being a professional. With a growth mindset, one can accept learning challenges and use them as opportunities for continuous improvement. Even physicians who perform at a high level need feedback to inform their self-assessment and direct future learning.
- **Follow up.** There are many ways to follow up on feedback. Sometimes, your follow-up will simply involve implementing the suggestions given to you. In other situations, you might want to set up another time to discuss the feedback, clarify observations, or get input into your future plans. This might include asking for specific feedback again in the future. At times your colleague's feedback may be off base and after reflection you may decide not to implement any changes.

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