Feedback and Difficult Conversations

"I am able to control only that of which I am aware. That of which I am unaware controls me. Awareness empowers me”. Sir John Whitmore

"Getting feedback is like finding your location on a map. While you need to know where you’ve been and what your destination is, it’s also critical to have an accurate picture of where you are now.” Successful Manager’s Handbook

Reality Check

I am on track if:

- I am prepared and have concrete data on which to base a feedback discussion.
- There is an open, honest and trusting environment, where all people in the team give and receive feedback often.
- The person to whom I offer developmental / corrective feedback understands exactly what they need to do to modify their actions / behaviours and improve results, and implements the changes that are agreed.
- I relate feedback – both positive and ‘not so positive’, to business outcomes

Warning signs are if:

- Nothing changes after a feedback conversation. Does the person have a practical understanding about what they need to change? Have they accepted the accountability for the actions associated with the change?
- I find myself or others getting overly defensive about the feedback being received. Is the feedback specific, about something that can be controlled?
- I only seem to find opportunities for my team members to improve. You often only see what you are looking for. Have I overlooked positive performance and results?

Things I can do to improve my effectiveness in providing feedback:

- Focus on building and maintaining an environment of trust. Trust is a fundamental ingredient in a good working relationship. Without it, people in your team will not be receptive to giving or receiving feedback nor have the opportunity to experience the benefits feedback can bring.

- Remember to check your intentions – feedback can be given for two purposes; to motivate (reinforce excellent performance and to encourage someone to continue or exceed that level of performance) or to change (to provide feedback about how to improve performance or develop skills). Stop for a moment and think about your mindset. What are your intentions for this conversation?

- Set yourself up for success. When your intention for feedback is to change something, spend time preparing for this conversation. Take time out to become aware of your own emotions and assumptions. Be clear about what the issue is, why it matters, the evidence to support the view, and an idea about what you want the person to do differently. Think about what you’ll say, when and where you’ll say it, and consider the possible response.

- Be aware and deliberate during the actual conversation. Consider your language, tone and body language and how this is being received. Ask both open and closed questions to get the person talking. Listen to the responses you get.

- Be prepared to facilitate an open discussion to explore what is really going on. Don’t assume you are right! Your assumptions may be ‘spot on’ or you may discover something you weren’t aware of… Be prepared to make a choice based on how the conversation pans out – push on with your plan or adapt to what you discover.

- Follow through on what is agreed. Leaders often feel that once they’ve had the conversation, they’re done. There is a big difference between ‘getting it’ and ‘doing it’. Gain agreement about the next steps and how you’ll support and monitor progress.

- Reflect on your feedback experiences and identify opportunities to learn and improve. How did the feedback conversation go? Did I achieve what I was hoping to achieve? What would I do differently next time?

- Focus on how you personally invite and respond to feedback. Try to role model what you expect from others.

- You may also wish to seek feedback about how you give feedback. At the end of a feedback session, ask how you did and what you can do differently to be more helpful.


"Feedback that works", Cynthia M. Phoel, HBR classic.

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Practical Tools for ‘Difficult Conversations’

A Possible Process for your conversation:

### Difficult Conversations

**Getting Started**
- State the issue
- Give a specific example
- State why it matters
- Say how you would like it to be
- Invite input from the person

**The Conversation**
Engage in conversation – listen, ask questions

**The Resolution**
- End with agreement and or commitment, write it down
- Decide a follow-up

### Planning Tools you could use before the conversation

**Questions for Reflection**

- What is the issue to discuss with this person?
- What are the consequences of this situation?
- What is the evidence you have to support it?
- Why do I believe X is doing Y?
- How do I believe they will receive the feedback?
- What might you fear about having this conversation? What might be difficult for you to hear?
- How can you help them? What support can you give? What is your responsibility?
- What obstacles might you face? How can you overcome them?
- How can you bring about and understanding and acceptance of the situation and a way forward?
- How might you follow up the agreed actions?
Planning Worksheet to prepare for the conversation

How might you start this conversation? What might a possible script sound like...

Getting Started - The Beginning
State the Issue (what I would like to talk to you about is...)
Describe the Situation [give a specific example] (for example...)
State why it matters (This is important because...)
Say how you would like it to be (so what I’d like to resolve is ...) restate the issue
Invite their perspective (so I would like to hear your perspective...)

The Conversation
What questions might be helpful in a conversation like this? (see examples on right)
What should you be conscious of with regards to:
- Listening skills
- Tone and Body language
- Trust and Rapport
- Staying on track

How might the employee respond? How will you deal with this?

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Questions you could ask to encourage discussion

- What else...? (Plain silence can be just as or even more effective)
- What are the reasons why you feel like this / have come to this view?
- What would the consequences of that be for you...for others...
- How do you feel about that?
- What caused you to do that? What was behind the way you acted?
- What effect will that have on the situation?
- What is the hardest part of this for you?
- What might you do to help the situation?
- What advice would you give a friend in your position?
- What could you gain / lose by doing / saying that?
- If someone else did / said that to you, what would you think / feel / do?
- When you say... (hold the silence and get them to elaborate)