Workplace Feedback
The Complete Guide to Giving and Getting
—for Top Bosses, Entry-levels, and Everyone in Between
CONTENTS

1 Feedback: Does it Have to Hurt?
2 Five Steps to Giving Feedback
4 How to Receive Feedback
5 Feedback Conversations that Work
6 It’s All in the Timing
7 Giving the Boss Feedback
10 Beyond Feedback: Breaking the Vicious Circle
Feedback: Does It Have to Hurt?

How is it that giving or receiving feedback on the job is so treacherous for so many people, regardless of where they work or what they do? For something so critical to performance and to getting strong results, giving or receiving input is so often poorly understood and poorly handled. It doesn’t have to be that way.

“Feedback” means sharing information with co-workers about the impact their behavior is having on the team’s results, process, or relationships. It can be shared up or down the reporting ladder, as well as laterally, to peers. Many organizations have established formal, annual performance feedback systems (which everyone usually hates).

Giving and receiving feedback builds trust, removes interpersonal barriers, and guides everyone on the team toward improved performances. Feedback can also be a powerful (and often-overlooked) boost that individuals can use to course-correct, become more effective, and accelerate their careers.

But let’s be honest—almost nobody likes getting feedback. Hearing the words, “I’d like to give you some feedback,” sends many people running for cover. We picture ourselves in the dog house, worrying about what we’ve done wrong and preparing justifications for our behavior.

What’s more, many people don’t like giving feedback. We fear an angry or hurt reaction from the recipient, so we prefer to put our head in the sand, avoid the issue, and hope improvements occur on their own. Unfortunately, magical improvements rarely happen.

The purpose of this handbook is to give you specific pointers, strategies, and methods for giving and receiving feedback, so that you—and your team—can improve performance and build mutual trust. This guidebook will also give you handy pointers for what to do when feedback is not the answer.

“I tend to give very honest feedback, so people have stopped asking me.”

~Anonymous
Five Steps to Giving Feedback

By Michael Papanek

Most leaders do not ensure that regular feedback is a part of their organization’s culture. They miss an easy way to make performance improvements, improve morale, and develop employees.

Feedback is avoided for many reasons: fear of an emotional reaction, fear of retaliation, or the lack of a strategy for having the conversation. The problem is, the issue that is driving a need for feedback will not go away on its own, but tends to get worse until the person cannot stand it anymore. This leads to “drive-by” feedback: a quick hit of why you are driving me crazy, then a quick escape.

On the receiving side, even employees who want to improve fear having to defend themselves or agree to something they do not really believe.

The solution lies in leadership modeling of feedback, and the use of some simple but powerful guidelines for giving—or better yet, exchanging—feedback. It is an organizational truism that the higher one goes in an organization, the less feedback one gets. So start by asking for feedback from others, and then be very careful not to get defensive. Then try to act in a visible way on the feedback. This will show the organization you are willing to “go first” and lead the way before you ask others to make a change. If feedback is the “breakfast of champions,” you will need to eat the first bowl yourself.

Successful feedback must be focused on three key dimensions: results, process, and relationship. The feedback must increase results, use a clear process, and lead to enhanced, rather than diminished, relationships.

If feedback is the “breakfast of champions,” you will need to eat the first bowl yourself.
This can be done by following these guidelines:

1. Choose when to give the feedback: if you are too angry or upset yourself, you will not be able to give the feedback in a respectful way. Wait until you cool down.

Also, find a place that allows the employee to hear the feedback (especially negative) in private and a time when they can handle it emotionally, but do not wait so long that they can no longer act on the input. Positive feedback should be given quickly, when the employee is still “sweating from the effort.”

2. Describe the behavior using the most objective language possible and be specific. Words like “bad attitude” will not be understood and will seem judgmental.

3. State the impact of the behavior on you, the team, the goal, the client, etc. Saying what the impact is allows the receiver of the feedback to better understand why they should change or at least consider the input.

4. Make a suggestion or request. You may ask them to change a behavior that is not working, to continue or do more of an effective behavior, or to simply understand your point of view. “You are not well organized” is a criticism, not feedback. Have a concrete action in mind so the employee has a clear path to improvement.

5. Finally, check for understanding and be open to alternative views. There may be relevant facts you are unaware of and asking for a response avoids just dumping on the employee and damaging the relationship.
How to Receive Feedback

Feedback is information about the effect our behavior has on others. It is a gift of information that we can use to make conscious choices about what we want to stop doing, continue doing, or start doing to achieve the consequences we intend in our interactions with others. When receiving feedback, you may feel tense or defensive. Here are some strategies to help you:

1. Summarize your understanding of the feedback. Repeat the speaker’s main concerns so that you can confirm your understanding as well as convey that you’ve heard his/her point of view.

   **Note:** This summary does not mean you necessarily agree. It’s a step for building understanding, not agreement.

   **For example:** “My delay in communicating the new schedule makes it difficult for you to manage your own work commitments and you’d like me to let you know in a more timely manner in the future.”

2. Ask questions for clarification. Inquire if you need more information in order to understand or to respond.

   **For example:** “I’d like to know what ‘timely’ means for you so that I can respond to your request.”

3. Respond to the feedback. If the feedback comes with a suggestion, simply acknowledge the suggestion. If the feedback comes with a request, you have at least four choices:
   - Accept the request
   - Decline the request
   - Make a counteroffer or amendment
   - Simply express understanding

   **For example:** “I accept your request, Doug, to inform you within 24 hours of any corporate decisions or actions that may have direct impact on your assignments. Thanks for the feedback.”
Feedback Conversations that Work

There are numerous ways in which feedback can go wrong. Let’s look at feedback behavior that is likely to cause a feedback breakdown.

1. Avoid evaluation of what has occurred in terms of “right or wrong,” or “good or bad.” By skipping the judging language and instead using descriptive terms, you help the individual really hear the feedback and refrain from responding in a knee-jerk manner.

2. Focus on observations, not inferences. Observations refer to what you can see or hear, while inferences refer to the assumptions and interpretations you make from what you see or hear. For example, if an employee has made an error on a spreadsheet, don’t jump to the conclusion that she’s made errors in other spreadsheets.

3. Keep away from incomplete feedback. It is too easy for the feedback recipient to jump to a faulty conclusion and then act on the basis of that conclusion.

Coach gives incomplete feedback

Coachee jumps to conclusion about the meaning of the feedback

Coachee takes action based on faulty conclusions
Feedback has the most positive effect when both the giver and the receiver make a conscious choice about when and how to participate. Choosing the context in which to give feedback is crucial to its effectiveness. Here’s a handy illustrated graph with suggestions and cautions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHEN TO EXCHANGE FEEDBACK</th>
<th>WHEN NOT TO EXCHANGE FEEDBACK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• When you notice a teammate has accomplished a goal successfully, or that his/her work has really supported the team effort.</td>
<td>• When you’re too angry or upset to give (or receive) feedback in a respectful way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When you’re concerned that a teammate’s behavior or performance is impeding the progress of the team.</td>
<td>• When you just want to “dump” your feelings and you’re not interested in building a relationship; it’s better to wait until you’re in a better frame of mind.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• When something a teammate is doing has an impact on you personally and inhibits building a trusting relationship.</td>
<td>• When the setting or time available doesn’t provide an opportunity for a meaningful exchange. If you’re rushing to an appointment in five minutes, it’s best to postpone until you have more breathing room.</td>
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Giving the Boss Feedback

If giving a peer or subordinate feedback is tough, then giving a manager feedback is tougher. This article, by Beth O’Neill, was published originally in Fast Company.

The late Ed Koch was famous for asking New Yorkers “how’m I doing?” in the course of his three terms as the city’s mayor. Whether the brash and combative Koch was genuinely interested in an answer is anyone’s guess, but the question is fairly rare for a leader—in politics or business.

When’s the last time your boss asked you that kind of question?

If he or she did, would you know how to answer it—especially if you needed to give feedback about his or her behavior or specific actions?

Employee feedback to the boss is one of the most common workplace challenges, but few people know how to do it. On the other hand, feedback to employees is common practice and widely written about—in both high-brow and more accessible, lower-brow books. And yet, as common as employee feedback is, leaders often struggle with telling employees what they need to change.

If feedback is often tough for leaders, telling the boss how you think he’s doing is the equivalent of touching the third rail for many employees.

And yet, feedback to the boss is crucial for driving results and achieving success.

Bill Gates was once quoted as saying his most important job as a CEO was to take action when presented with unpleasant news, or face the consequences. If a CEO doesn’t act, said Gates, “people will eventually stop bringing bad news to your attention and that is the beginning of the end.”

Gates is said to be a tough boss—going to him with bad news must have posed a challenge to some people. But for Gates, or anyone else’s boss, giving a leader specific and timely feedback helps him or her be more effective, with obvious implications across the organization.
What follows is a structured approach to telling your boss what you think.

**ASK FOR PERMISSION**

Acknowledging that the leader has the option to say “no” shows respect and reinforces trust. Choose a “good” time—when your leader is not under extraordinary stress, and as closely tied to the event about which you are giving feedback as possible. Also pick a neutral, private place. To boost your chances of receiving permission, emphasize that you’re aligned with the leader’s goals and that you believe this feedback will help you both accomplish them better and faster.

This is where you get to practice listening. “Yes” means “yes,” and you can proceed with confidence. If the answer is “no,” on the other hand, you can be assured he or she probably won’t listen to you.

**DESCRIBE YOUR BOSS’S BEHAVIOR**

Describing behavior provides a common and specific point of reference for the conversation. This step is critical, yet it’s the one that’s most commonly skipped. It’s important to keep the conversation focused on behavior and not personalities. Center feedback on what you have seen, not what you believe or think. For example, “In Monday’s meeting we were brainstorming ideas to build traffic on our site. You told James he ‘didn’t understand the implications of his idea.’ ”

**DESCRIBE HOW YOUR BOSS’S BEHAVIOR IMPACTED THE GROUP**

Saying how you or others were affected helps the leader see the consequences (often unintended) of his or her behavior. For example, “I noticed after you said that James didn’t understand the implications of his idea, James didn’t speak up again and participation in the brainstorm slowed.” Use feedback to inform, not advise. Keep it simple, too. It’s not necessary to mention every aspect of his or her behavior at once.

**ASK YOUR BOSS FOR INSIGHTS AROUND THE CAUSES OF THE BEHAVIOR**

Asking the leader for his/her perception of what is causing the behavior helps to identify ways to enhance or change the behavior. “Any thoughts about why or what caused you to make that comment to James?” Be careful here and make sure to ask the question as neutrally as possible to avoid putting the leader on the defensive. This puts the two of you into dialogue, and places the leader in a position not only to problem-solve, but to save face as well.

**ASK FOR OR MAKE A SUGGESTION OR REQUEST**

A specific suggestion increases the likelihood that the leader will stop a behavior that impedes performance, continue a behavior you find helpful, and/or find out more about the behavior and its impact.

For example, “Given your leadership role and the associated risk of hindering meeting participation, I wonder if you might consider refraining from judging or criticizing ideas when the group is brainstorming.”

**BUILD AN AGREEMENT ON NEXT STEPS (IF ANY)**

Creating an action step supports your boss in following through on commitments and sends
a strong message that you’re looking to be constructive on behalf of everyone. For example, “You might want to check in with James to reinforce the value you place on his ideas.” This points the leader to accountability and will provide you with the opportunity to give positive reinforcement after the next meeting.

No less a leader than Jim Kim, president of the World Bank Group and former president of Dartmouth College, says the biggest commitment leaders can make is to listen to their teams with humility—and to constantly seek advice from colleagues in order to improve. Kim also admits that listening to his employees was foreign for him at first.

Obviously, giving leaders feedback is delicate business. And there is no guarantee that doing so will change your boss’s behavior. Yet providing timely, behavioral feedback can help you strengthen your relationship with your boss. Because so many important initiatives are hung up or derailed when feedback to the boss is missing, you can also help to ensure that yours won’t be one of them.
Beyond Feedback: Breaking the Vicious Circle

INTRODUCTION
When interpersonal problems arise at work, many of us have been taught to address them by giving one-on-one feedback. While this technique is often effective, it isn’t always a panacea for conflict and behavior issues. This article will help explain why this is so, and suggest a few steps to take when feedback is not enough.

THE VICIOUS CIRCLE: AN EXAMPLE
So, you’ve got an interpersonal breakdown at work. It’s sticky, and it has brought you and your team’s productivity to a grinding halt. Many will suggest—and I agree—that often the best step is to give the other person feedback about his or her behavior. At the same time, I’ve learned over the years, after countless coaching conversations and consulting engagements, that feedback is not always the answer. Let me illustrate with an example.

Several years ago I consulted to a team that was in serious trouble. They were on an aggressive product development timeline, barely keeping up with the schedule, and in interpersonal breakdown. The group had become polarized—the manager on one side, the team on the other. I was hired to come in and get these guys “fixed.” Give them some feedback, teach them some skills, and get them back on track.

As I interviewed everyone to understand what was going on, a clear pattern emerged. The more the manager (I’ll call her “Sara”) pushed, the more the team stopped talking to her. The more they stopped talking to her, the more she pushed. So, they could give her feedback, she could give them feedback. She had, and they had, and things got worse. By the time I was called in, they were communicating by terse emails and getting deeper into it every day.

In my individual and group conversations with them, it became clear they each had only part of the story. The team was wondering: what happened to their leader? Was she becoming a “suit”? Was Sara bucking for yet another promotion? And the more she pushed, the more they balked.

Sara was under increasing pressure from the executive level not only to deliver, but to accelerate the timeline. In fact, she believed she was shielding the team members from much worse pressure than they even suspected, protecting them from the executive perception that maybe they were losing their edge. The more they balked at her efforts, the more she was starting to wonder if maybe the execs were right.

The last thing this team needed was another one-way feedback session, where one side would give feedback and the other would respond. In spite of their best intentions, my facilitation, and all the guidelines for giving feedback in the world, they wouldn’t have gotten anywhere. They had to see their pattern of interlocking perceptions and

If people can’t change the story, they can’t break the cycle.
actions, and how that pattern had become fixed in cement. They had work to do, product features to rethink, roles and work processes to fix. But first they had to break their vicious circle before they could start changing the things that could get them back on track.

GETTING ON THE BALCONY

Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, in their book, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading*, described the wisdom of “getting on the balcony” to see the pattern of a situation. Heifetz wrote that a leader must be able to get some distance from the challenging situation in order to gain perspective. He refers to this practice as “getting on the balcony” in order to see the bigger picture, thus breaking the spell of the repetitive, unsound thinking or agitation that may prevail on the ground.

Heifetz writes: “‘Getting on the balcony’ captures the mental activity of stepping back in the midst of action and asking, ‘What’s really going on here?’ Few tasks strain our abilities more than putting this idea into practice. Without some perspective on the bigger picture, you are likely to misperceive the situation and make the wrong diagnosis, leading you to misguided decisions about whether and how to intervene.”

The hardest work is doing what you must when you return to the dance floor.

If I pull myself off the dance floor to have a broader view, this may require even more courage than giving someone feedback. That’s because when I take the balcony view, I need to see my own part as well as everyone else’s. We humans seem much better at getting committed to our one-sided version of a story, in which we appear as hero or victim, than a more comprehensive view. It’s so easy to stay in the dynamic, and we all know how a well-fed aggravation will escalate into anger. I have mediated dozens of conflicts over the past twenty years, for groups and individuals at work and in their communities. As the participants explored when and how things broke down, there were usually one or two pivotal events that laid down the course to ruin. By the time I got involved, everyone had made up elaborate stories about not only what the other person or group did, but what each party was thinking and feeling. The problem is, if the trouble has gone on too long, the stories become intractable. There’s too much investment, and too much supporting evidence (since we tend to see what we’re looking for). If people can’t change the story, they can’t break the cycle.

Fortunately, the team members I describe had the willingness to see their own parts, start talking, and figure out how to do a few things differently. Teams don’t necessarily need an outside consultant, but usually can do this for themselves. It just takes one or two influential members to notice a misunderstanding, an unmet expectation, or differing needs. If a group can learn to discuss these issues before they escalate, it’s much easier to avoid impasses and breakdowns.

MAPPING THE PATTERN

It can be useful to map out a group pattern in a graphic to make it easier to see. For example, here’s the picture I drew with Sara and the team:

The figure shows where the breakdown began, and the ensuing cycle of misunderstanding, disappointment, and eventual alienation. Once the team saw this pattern, they were able to correct it, and knew what to watch for in the future.

One of the originators of this method, Diana McLain Smith, describes the theory and process in her recent book, *Divide or Conquer*. New York: Penguin Group; 2008. I recommend it as an engaging and enlightening read.
TWO CAN USE THE MAP, TOO

The same principle, of understanding the bigger dynamic or pattern, can apply equally well in one-to-one relationships. I recently noticed some tension in a working relationship with a fellow employee. He’s one of my favorite people, but I was feeling irritated after a couple of our conversations. A small irritation is one thing; it’s a different matter if you’re still thinking about it a week later, and I was.

Hmmm, I thought, that’s worth exploring. From my “balcony,” I asked myself these questions:

- Has this happened before with him and me?
- When does it seem to happen?
- Was there something I didn’t say but was thinking?
- What was the one thing he did or said that hooked me?
- What was I expecting that didn’t happen and what was I expecting that did (“There he goes again”)?

As I let all these questions simmer, I started to see the dynamic. When I mapped it out (it took all of three minutes), I realized there was a repeated pattern in which I experienced being “misunderstood.” I saw an aspect of our roles that needed to be clarified because more was at stake than just a few ruffled feathers. And it would never have been solved by “giving him feedback.”

FEEDBACK: It’s still a good thing

We all live in the world with only the vaguest notion of our impact, and sometimes that matters. Clearly, when we’re effective or helpful, we ought to know it. And when our actions are working against us or others, we ought to know that, too. Given how most of us put our heads down and barrel through, sometimes it falls on another person to let us in on what everyone else knows and we probably don’t. So feedback is a good thing, when it’s done right.

I bet anyone who would bother to read this article has learned the rules for doing feedback right. Make it specific, behavioral, non-judgmental, and about things people can control. It sounds straightforward and obvious, and it takes years of practice. In fact, despite the fact that I teach it all the time, I still make mistakes. So, it’s hard to do it right, and the best we can do is keep working on it.
THE HARDEST WORK

The hardest work is doing what you must when you return to the dance floor. Heifetz wrote: “You have to return to the dance floor if you want to affect what’s happening. Staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as ineffective as never achieving that perspective in the first place. The process must be iterative, not static. Next, you need to understand where people are—otherwise you can’t lead them forward. Both your survival and your success depend on your reaching a true understanding of the varying perspectives among the factions.” This is especially true if you are one of those factions!

So the next time you experience a breakdown in a relationship at work, ask yourself: Is this something one-to-one feedback will help? Or is it perhaps a long-standing tango—and the remedy lies in getting on the balcony?

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Interaction Associates

About Interaction Associates

Interaction Associates (IA) is a 44-year-old innovator that equips people to work better together in order to realize superior business results. The firm helps global organizations build high-involvement, collaborative cultures by developing their leaders, teams, and change agents. IA offers customized consulting, learning and development, and coaching services. It was named one of Training Industry’s Top 20 Leadership Training Companies in 2012–2014, and was listed in its Content Development Watch List in 2012–2014.