

PROVIDING FEEDBACK WITH SENSITIVITY

What is providing feedback with sensitivity?

Providing feedback with sensitivity refers to the consistent demonstration of the ability to know how to give feedback in a constructive and positive manner, leaving the person feeling they are able to move forward with strong direction.

Why is it important to provide feedback with sensitivity?

There are many types of feedback however we will look at two verbal types of feedback here;

1. Praise
2. Constructive Criticism

If our aim is to promote trust, confidence and development of self and others then the important thing for both types of feedback is to provide them sensitively and constructively. This is especially true in relationship that we want to be ongoing, as it is how we maintain the relationships in a positive way.. Feedback delivered with care and sensitivity can be used to reinforce good associations.

Good feedback, provided frequently and consistently with sensitivity, has the power to increase the other persons self-motivation and productivity very significantly.

Why is it so easy to slip up in the area of providing feedback with sensitivity?

Praise is one form of feedback and it needs to be specific and carefully delivered for the impact to be positive and effective. We can easily forget that praise is feedback and, if delivered ineffectively, it can have a negative effect rather than the positive impact it was meant to have.

Example: you submit your first piece of work to your manager and they say, 'that's good'. As time goes on and you submit many other pieces of work your manager always says, 'that's good.' The first time we may feel really pleased and want to do more and better. However, as it becomes the norm to hear 'that's good', we don't actually know which specific area is good, if any; so the positive effect is eroded and the effect can even escalate into negativity. So it is helpful if we are specific in our feedback, delivering it in a way that is truly beneficial for the recipient, not simply easy for us to pass on as is the case with the 'that's good' comment.

A definition of criticism is; to review the merit of a person or thing, then express and expose that review. Yet so many people shy away from the word criticism, even though this definition says it is 'to review the merit of the person or thing'. It seems that the word criticism has become entwined with the notion of negative feedback whereas it is just as valid a part of the critical process to give voice to what is working well in addition to areas for improvement. So it is important to remember to voice both of these aspects with giving feedback.

Additionally it is critical to remember that our comments need to be directed towards the person's behaviour and the effect it is having as opposed to being about the person themselves as constructive criticism is not about 'attacking' the individual.

Some examples of providing feedback with sensitivity

Notice the different effect of the two comments following:

- 'You're always late and I'm sick of having to cover for you' (*note the tone of blame as well as the blur between the person and the behaviour*)
- 'Have you thought about the impact that you often running late has on your colleagues as well as on your reputation? For my part I can't afford to continue covering for you so I wanted to flag this change I'm making with you.' (*note the distinction between the person and the behaviour and the clear boundary between who has the power to change who's behaviour i.e. we can only change our own behaviour*).

When delivering criticism, if it is like the first example i.e. not clear or constructive, it can be ignored or, worse still, we can offend and hurt people when our real intent is to help them change a dysfunctional behaviour or pattern. This is why it serves us all so much better to deliver criticism clearly, constructively (directed towards behaviours and their affects) and sensitively – as in the second example.

A good way to think of how to deliver critical feedback about unsatisfactory behaviours is to think and speak about these areas as being opportunities for improvement. And it is also useful to follow up an area for improvement with a validation of an area that the person excels in. So to come back to our example it might be that we could say:

- 'You run late too often and it's just holding you back; I've seen you learn and grow in so many other areas of the job, like dealing with difficult clients, that I just know you can change this pattern'.

Evaluate how you provide feedback with sensitivity

- When do you give constructive feedback for a performance effort worth acknowledging?
- How consistent are you at giving feedback? Are you always giving one type of feedback to the same people? If so, what is stopping you from giving both types to everyone?
- Call the last eight people you gave feedback to in business. Tell them you are doing some professional development exercises and would like to know how they found your feedback. Ask concrete questions, such as
 - 'The last time I delivered feedback to you, how quickly after the event did I deliver it?', 'How did you feel after our conversation?'
 - If they say they found the experience a negative one or unhelpful, ask the question: 'What would have made the experience better for you?'
 - Follow up with: 'What would I have to do, if we were to repeat the exercise, to exceed your expectations?'

- Make a note over the next month; of the number of times you give constructive praise and also how many times you give constructive criticism. When making a note use your own learning style to create spreadsheets, draw, use lists, whatever best suits you and makes the biggest impact on you.
- When giving feedback rate yourself from 1 to 4 on each question below (1 = don't demonstrate / 2 = partially demonstrate / achieve / excel.
 - How prepared am I to listen fully to what the other party says?
 - How specific is my feedback?
 - How well do I stick to behaviours and their effects, when feeding back?
 - How sensitive and caring I'm I, when giving feedback?

Improve providing feedback with sensitivity

After you have completed your evaluation, if you have noticed some room for improvement, you might like to try some of the following strategies:

- Timing of the feedback – make sure that you keep a note of how promptly you follow up with feedback after the event. Feedback needs to be given as close as is possible to the occurrence when the event is fresh in the minds of all concerned. The value of the constructive feedback is lessened greatly when delivered a long time after the event.
- When feeding back to someone, whether it is praise or criticism, check how specific you are being. The more specific you are, and the less generally you speak, the better the impact of the feedback.
 - Praise example: "The layout of this work is really good, as I can pick out what I need from it very easily." Vs "That's good."
 - Constructive Criticism: "The layout of this work is proving difficult for me to understand; can you redo using (be specific when giving instructions of what you need)." Vs "This is rubbish go back and redo the whole thing."
- Think carefully about the words you choose to use, as this will determine an amicable or hostile conversation; like "That work was awful....." Vs "That work isn't the best I've seen from you...."
- Avoid "need too" phrases as they are very judgemental and cause hostility.
 - "Be careful of the words you use as they create the world around you."
[Navaho Indian saying](#)
- Allow the individual to input first if you can, to determine their awareness of the situation and if they have taken any learning from the situation themselves. Collaborative work always works best.
 - Taking the example above and adding to that, e.g. "That work isn't the best work I've seen from you, what's your take on it." This is one way of adding to it. You can try others that best suit your own words and style.

- Look for what people do well and feed that specific praise back. Practise doing this at least once a day, making notes each day on who it was and what they did well.
- Be sincere and use empathy. Consider the other persons thoughts, feelings and learning style. Be sensitive to the other person's differences. This all avoids mixed messages.
- Give the feedback, person to person, not through electronic mediums.
- It is your responsibility to leave the person feeling positive and motivated about the changes they need to make, to grow and develop.
- Remember that it is never helpful to involve outside parties in the conversation; speak first and directly to the person involved.

Further resources

If you would like to develop further in the area of Providing Feedback with Sensitivity, the following books, courses and consultants may be worth considering. Please note that High Ideals does not endorse or receive any direct benefit from recommending the following resources, the list is simply a suggestive collection of materials that members of the High Ideals management team have found useful in their own development.

- Tell Me How I'm Doing (book) by Richard L Williams
- Job Feedback (book) by Manuel London
- Giving Feedback (book) by Harvard Business School Press
- Google and YouTube – Giving constructive feedback
- <http://www.high-ideals.com> – Check out the Member Directory section for High Ideals members who offer services which could support you, such as coaching, mentoring or consulting on High Ideals criteria/values.

Author and editor acknowledgement

High Ideals would like to acknowledge and thank Mags Bell for her work on this document. Mags' is the Partnership Development Manager and Assessor of High Ideals, Business/Personal Gemmologist, Coach, Author and Speaker. To find out more about Mags, please visit his profile on the High Ideals directory by clicking [here](#) and search by name.

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