

Giving and receiving feedback are among the most important skills for mentors and managers. If done well it can help to develop an open and trusting relationship that benefits both parties. If done badly – or not at all – it encourages attacking and defensive behavior and causes people to take up positions from which it is then difficult to move them. Many people find it much easier to give feedback when it is positive than when it is negative. However, both positive and negative feedback are useful because this information helps us become aware of ourselves, determine the consequences of our actions, and change or modify our behavior.

### GIVING FEEDBACK

1. When talking with a person about a problem, describe as objectively as possible what you saw the person do or heard the person say. Stick to the facts, and avoid statements that communicate judgments and opinions.
2. Use “I” statements to describe how the behavior is affecting you. For example:  
“**When you** (describe a behavior that you observe in the other person) **I feel** (one or two words that describes a feeling) **because** (explain as well as you can why you react this way).”  
  
Here is the example filled in:  
“**When you** show up late to the staff meetings **I feel** frustrated **because** it means you miss discussions about our services.”
3. Differentiate between your own feelings on the matter and the facts. If your feelings have been aroused, it is possible that you will allow these to obscure the facts. As a result, you may start to sound parental, using words like “must” and “should have,” that can elicit defensive behavior, or engage in a tense conversation that stifles communication.
4. Avoid words and concepts whose definitions may vary from person to person. Rather than saying someone is “unprofessional,” describe what you mean by offering examples of the type of behavior, communication, dress, attendance problem or other issue that has raised concerns.
5. Avoid absolute terms, like “always” and “never.” The receiver will often end up defending the exaggeration instead of responding to the real issue. Instead, think about how often the problem occurs. Once a week? Whenever there’s a tight deadline? Late in the afternoon?
5. If your emotions are high, wait to give the feedback until you feel calmer. Engaging in a feedback conversation when you are very angry or otherwise upset may prevent you from presenting the feedback in a constructive way, and may also limit your receptivity to the other person’s responses. High emotion can lead to tunnel vision – on all sides.
6. Direct your feedback at modifiable behaviors, not at something over which the receiver has little or no control.
7. Ask the person to offer his or her interpretation of what you have shared. Are there any misunderstandings that need clarification or further explanation? Determine if it would be helpful to write down your shared expectations to help memorialize the key points in your conversation.

**Feedback is a two-way conversation. The person receiving the feedback needs an opportunity to reflect on and respond to what is being shared. Some suggestions on how to receive feedback include:**

1. Listen carefully to what the giver has to say and don't interrupt. Avoid spending that time just thinking of how you will respond.
2. Make an effort not to be defensive. Evaluate what is being said with an open mind and try to understand it.
3. Seek examples of the behavior at issue to help you understand exactly what the person is emphasizing.
4. Summarize in your own words what you understand the giver of the feedback to be saying. This helps you check for misunderstandings and also lets the other person know that you were listening.
5. It is okay to share your feelings about the feedback, being sure to avoid becoming defensive. This can be helpful for both the giver and receiver because it can lead to a better understanding of the issue or behavior at hand.
6. Don't forget to breathe. Receiving feedback can be stressful. The more relaxed and alert you can be the more useful the feedback can be to you.
7. As the receiver of feedback, you determine what you can take from the feedback and how you will modify or change your behavior. This may mean giving yourself some time to think about or sort out what you heard.

**When structuring your feedback sessions, try the following:**

- Start with the positive. Share something that shows you value the person and his or her contribution. Make sure this comment is factual.
- Choose your priority areas. Even if there are many things going wrong, it can be demoralizing for someone to receive a lot of negative feedback at once. Aim to address important areas first.
- Allow people to explore the implications of their behavior and, if possible, come to the same conclusions that you have.
- Own your own feedback but be aware it is only one perception. Listen for any alternative view and do not prejudge if you can avoid it.
- If you, the other person, or you both feel it would be helpful, write down the key points in the conversation, or ask the other person to do so. Then review that document to ensure it accurately captures what you discussed. This need not be a formal document – even an email will do.

***Adapted from the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and The Learning Curriculum, Sue Baughman, University of Maryland.***