

Effective Feedback Techniques For Training and Supervising Volunteers

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We give and receive feedback daily without even being aware of it. When we smile and say "Hi," we are giving feedback. A certificate of recognition given to a volunteer is a form of feedback. Walking out of a meeting or workshop is again a way of giving feedback. The problem is, these forms are indirect, not specific. The receiver cannot know what caused this feedback to be given. It is through feedback that we can learn to see ourselves as others see us. Unfortunately, what we receive from others is not truly feedback, but compliments, criticism and put-downs. We cannot learn from these statements. The primary purpose of feedback is to cause the receiver to think, learn and grow.

Feedback focuses on a person's behavior, not his or her intentions. Intentions are private and personal. They are known only to the person. Unless the intentions are explained, other people can only speculate about them. Causing further confusion is the fact that many people perceive behavior as being negatively intended, when in fact it may not be. For example, a person's leaving a workshop before it is over can be construed to mean that the presenter was boring, when, in fact, the person left because s/he had to go to the bathroom.

Unless one checks with the other person, one really has no way of knowing for sure whether or not it is correctly understood what the words and behaviors

mean. In this case, one is soliciting feedback. Using the previous example, if someone left a workshop before it was over, the presenter could feed back this behavior and ask the receiver to explain his/her intentions.

Giving feedback is reacting to another person's behavior in terms of how the individual feels about or perceives that behavior. Receiving feedback is getting a reaction to one's own behavior in terms of how others see it or how it is affecting them. Feedback itself is not of value unless the receiver can use it. This article will show ways of giving feedback which better enable the receiver to utilize the information for his/her own learning and growth.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR HELPFUL FEEDBACK

1. *Give feedback directly with open body language.* Before feedback can be given, a relationship must exist between the two people. That relationship includes trust, caring, acceptance and openness. When you give feedback, look directly at the receiver. Your arms should be open or down to your side, rather than crossed over your chest. If seated, you should sit straight up, not hunched over. This helps build trust between the giver and receiver.

2. *Give feedback that is descriptive* of what the receiver is doing and of the effects s/he is having. This is more helpful than

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judging or explaining. The feedback should describe a behavior and state how that behavior is affecting the sender. For example, if you are trying to explain a procedure to a volunteer who continually does not do it correctly you might say, "I am frustrated because you seem to be missing what I am saying because you continually give the wrong information to callers." If, instead, you said, "You are stupid because you always do this procedure wrong," all you have accomplished is to judge the volunteer and are not specific in describing the troublesome behavior.

3. *Give feedback at a time when the receiver appears to be in a frame of mind to accept it.* You cannot expect someone who is visibly angry to hear objective constructive feedback. Likewise, someone who is crying will not focus on or hear what you are saying.

4. *Do not tell the receiver more than s/he can handle at any particular time.* To overload a person with feedback is to reduce the possibility that s/he may use what s/he receives effectively. Likewise, if a person receives too much feedback at any one time, s/he probably will not remember most of it. In order to learn from feedback, a person must have time to sit back and process what s/he has heard to fully understand the behavior in question and determine how that behavior will be changed.

5. *Always balance positive and negative feedback.* If you only give negative feedback, no matter how constructive, it will sound like criticism and will not be heard by the receiver.

FEEDBACK SHOULD FOCUS ON:

1. *The sharing of ideas and information rather than on giving advice.* By sharing ideas and information, we leave the person free to decide for him or herself how to use the ideas and the information. When we give advice we tell the person what to do with the information. In that sense we take away his/her freedom to determine for him or herself what is the most appropriate course of action. Remember, the idea-sharer is not the one who will live with the decision; the receiver is.

2. *Exploration of alternatives rather than answers.* The feedback should focus on a vari-

ety of options and means of changing a specific behavior. When we focus only on answers, the behavior may be changed for only a short while because a solution was chosen too quickly. For example, if giving feedback to a volunteer who is consistently late for his/her assignment, the feedback should include an exploration of ways for the volunteer to be on time.

3. *The value it may have to the recipient not on the value or release that it provides the person giving the feedback.* Help and feedback need to be given and heard as an offer, not an imposition. We have a tendency to give feedback to satisfy some need in ourselves, rather than focusing on the person who will receive it. An example would be someone who is angry and wants the other person to know it. This type of feedback tends to be given in general terms. The sender may feel better, but the receiver only will feel bad and will not learn anything.

4. *What is said rather than why it is said.* The parts of feedback which relate to the what, how, when and where are observable characteristics. The why it was said takes you from the observable to the inferred, and brings up questions of motive and intent.

TYPES OF FEEDBACK: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE

Remember, feedback, whether it is positive or negative, must enable the receiver to think and learn. Feedback must focus on a behavior. The following has, in part, been adapted from *The Assertive Workbook*, published by The Phoenix Institute.

Positive Feedback

Smiles, touches, being sought out, attention, and compliments are forms of positive feedback. These give us the information that we are valued and appreciated. Unsolicited positive feedback is an important foundation in any relationship. It is always nice to hear something good about ourselves, but for this to be feedback we must learn something from it. Too often, positive feedback is indirect. A compliment is an example of this type of feedback. We expect people to live on subtle, indirect positive feedback alone, leaving people to guess at what, or how

much, we value, like or care about them. For example, one would want to say "I value your opinion about my presentations because you are a careful listener and I know you will be truthful with me about my effectiveness," rather than "I would like your opinion on how effective my presentation was." If using the alternative statement, the receiver must guess one's meaning—that one feels the person is constructive or one never likes what everyone else does. Direct positive feedback is a more effective communication tool.

As stated earlier, it is important to balance positive and negative feedback. Too often, feedback only focuses on the negative. When this happens, the relationship begins to emphasize what is wrong or what needs to be changed, and the message you get (or give) is that things do not quite measure up. The staff/volunteer relationship can easily focus on the negative because of the need for training and evaluation. Positive feedback is essential to a cooperative working relationship. Unless positive feedback is ongoing, consistent and direct, the balance of working relationship will be skewed toward the negative.

Negative Feedback

While it is from positive feedback that we feel good, valued and appreciated, it is from negative feedback that we learn and grow. Before learning what negative feedback is, one must first learn what negative feedback is not. This specifically refers to criticism and put-downs.

A criticism is negative information that comes as a shock, is aggressive and arises within a relationship with no agreement for that kind of feedback. The receiver getting this type of feedback has two options to respond—to shut off or open up. Opening up turns the criticism into negative feedback. In some instances, a person may choose to shut off even if s/he thinks the criticism is true: when there is no agreement for negative feedback or when the criticism comes at a time when the receiver does not want it.

Shutting off the conversation (or stopping the action) occurs when the receiver responds with a short statement, such as "That's not true," "That's ridiculous" or "I

don't buy that." Opening up, or turning the criticism into feedback, are statements such as, "I want to hear more about this" or "I'm not aware of that, but I'm willing to talk about it."

A put-down is uninvited negative information that is delivered indirectly. There are several strategies for responding to put-downs. The decision in choosing a response should be based on the relationship with the sender, rather than on the content of the put-down. The receiver's options include stopping the action ("I don't want to hear any more about that."), confronting the put-down directly ("I feel really rotten about what you just said. I'd like to talk with you about it."), playing the game and exchanging put-downs ("It takes one to know one."), terminating the conversation (walking away), or replying with stock phrases ("I don't agree.").

When giving negative feedback certain ground rules must be followed:

1. *An explicit agreement must exist for the feedback to be heard by the receiver.* Without this, or if the agreement is implied or assumed, the sender is simply giving criticism to the receiver. If there is no explicit agreement, the person wishing to deliver the negative feedback must get permission to do so. For example: "I have got some concerns about what you have been saying to other people about me and I want to talk to you about it tonight. Are you willing to do that?" First, the speaker has given the receiver the option of whether or not he or she wishes to hear the feedback. Secondly, the receiver is given the option of when to hear the feedback.

2. *The speaker's feelings must be emphasized, using "I" messages.* When receiving feedback, it is important to not only describe a person's specific behavior, but to let that person know how that behavior effects you. The receiver should express the feelings that are caused by the behavior. For example: "I feel angry about what you've been saying and I want to talk about it."

3. *Stick to one issue* to avoid mixed messages and confusion. If more than one

issue is discussed, the receiver will not listen to any of it, or will forget the purpose of the feedback.

4. *Avoid good news/bad news statements.* This happens when the speaker sets up the receiver with a nice remark before delivering the negative information. For example, "I am really happy to see you tonight, but you are always late." The listener will only be confused by this message. H/she will not know whether to feel good or bad.

In order for negative feedback to be effective—that the receiver will hear it, process it, and act on it—the feedback must be direct, clear and concise. The speaker must understand the feedback before s/he can give it. The following is a process to go through to assure effective feedback:

1. What behavior am I observing?
2. How do I feel about that behavior?
3. Why do I feel as I do?
4. What do I want from the other person in regards to this behavior?

The speaker has the option of saying all or some of this to the person to whom s/he is giving feedback. Even if it is never said to the other person, to what one is reacting will be much clearer, as will how and why one is reacting in a particular way and what is wanted from that other person. Additionally, the receiver will be sure of what specific behavior is being fed back.

GUIDELINES TO REDUCE DEFENSIVENESS

Most people get defensive when receiving negative feedback. As seen, one reason for this is that most people do not know how to give effective, constructive negative feedback, such as with the criticisms and put-downs. It is possible to minimize a person's defensiveness and to maximize his/her ability to use it for his/her personal growth. Regardless of how accurate feedback may be, if a person cannot accept the information because s/he is defensive, then feedback is useless. Feedback must be given so that the

person receiving it can hear it in the most objective and least distorted way possible, understand it, and choose to use it or not.

The following are guidelines for constructive feedback:

1. *Use direct expression of feelings:* This can be difficult because the direct expression of feelings risks rejection. On the other hand, indirect expression of feelings is safer because it is ambiguous and offers an escape from commitment. It is more direct to say "I like you" rather than "You are a likeable person." Indirect statements also tend to include opinions or perceptions, not observable behavior. For example, an indirect statement may be "I feel that you are angry." The word angry is an opinion, something that the receiver cannot react to because he or she does not understand where the speaker is coming from. Instead, if the speaker said "I am anxious because you look angry," this is something the receiver can react to, understand and think about. People frequently assume that they are expressing their feelings directly when they state opinions starting with "I feel that . . .," but they are not.

2. *Describe behavior rather than interpret it:* Rather than say "You are hostile," one should describe the observable behavior that led one to think the person was hostile. For example, "you appeared hostile to me when you slammed down the telephone." The word hostile is an interpretation of that behavior, and may be the wrong interpretation. If you used the first statement, the receiver is not given the chance to agree or disagree with your interpretation.

3. *Give specific feedback rather than generalizations:* If one says "you are being hostile," one is giving feedback in general terms. The other person may not know to which behavior the speaker is referring. If s/he wanted to change s/he would not know which behavior to change. However, when the speaker is specific, the receiver knows to what behavior the sender is responding, which s/he can then change or modify. Using the above example, by specifying that the behavior is slamming down the telephone, the receiver now knows what behavior is being questioned.

4. *The receiver should have the freedom to change*, not be pressured into changing. Telling a person to change assumes that the sender knows what is right or wrong for the receiver of the feedback. Imposing standards, rather than options, on another person and expecting him/her to conform causes resistance and resentment. By giving the receiver the option to change, you also give the receiver the responsibility for his/her decision. For example, the volunteer who is consistently late for the assignment, upon hearing the feedback has the option of whether or not to change this behavior. By opting not to change, the volunteer understands that s/he may be asked to leave the organization.

5. *To be most effective, feedback should be given immediately after the event.* When feedback is given immediately, the event is fresh in everyone's minds. There are fewer questions about the observed behavior. When feedback is delayed, interpretations overshadow the recalled observation. There is a tendency to delay feedback—the sender may be nervous or embarrassed, fear hurting the receiver, fear exposing him or herself to other people's criticisms. Nevertheless, one must remember that feedback is given, not to criticize, but to help the receiver learn and grow and should always be given.

6. *If in a group situation, feedback should be group-shared rather than given separately.* When the group shares the feedback, members can also learn and grow from the experience.

7. *Give feedback only on those behaviors that can be changed or modified*, not on those that cannot (an example would be a foreign accent that one finds hard to understand or a person's mannerism which may be annoying). In giving feedback one must determine whether the receiver perceives his or her behavior as modifiable. Many behaviors can be easily changed through feedback and the person's conscious desire to change his or her behavior. If the behavior is unmodifiable, then the sender is wasting time and the receiver only becomes self-conscious and uncomfortable.

In summary, when giving feedback, the speaker must be specific and direct. The

focus must be on observable behaviors rather than intentions or assumptions. To be effective, the person giving the feedback is exposing him or herself, taking a risk, because s/he is discussing his/her own feelings about the behavior. Feedback, to be effective, must be done intentionally, rather than unconsciously. This will assure that the receiver will hear it, understand it and be able to act upon it.

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