

Successful feedback

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What is feedback?

Comments in the form of opinions about or reactions to something, or a person's performance of a task, etc., used as a basis for improvement, helpful information or criticism about prior action or behavior from an individual, communicated to another individual (or a group) who can use that information to adjust and improve current and future actions and behaviors.

Why do you need to give and receive feedback?

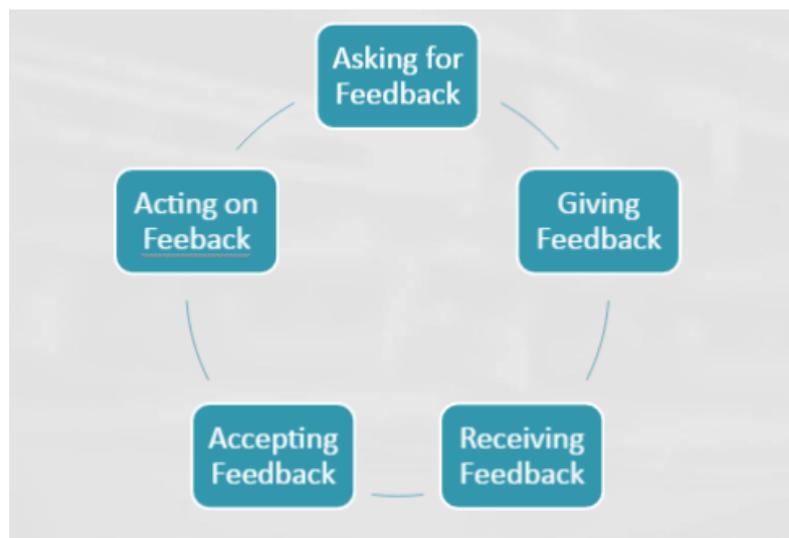
It helps learners to maximize their potential at different stages of training, raise their awareness of strengths and areas for improvement, and identify actions to be taken to improve performance. It is a mentor's obligation and responsibility to help the mentee identify and learn the skills and knowledge needed. Feedback allows the mentor to acknowledge the mentee's strengths and to motivate the mentee to work on areas of weakness. Your mentee wants and needs your feedback to move forward.

This content was originally developed by Elke Mueller based on Lois Zachary and Lory A. Fischler book *The Mentee's Guide: Making Mentoring Work for You* (2009)

What are some challenges in giving or in receiving feedback?

Avoiding the conversation until you'll get frustrated, getting so caught up in being tactful that your message gets lost, the opposite-being unkind and making it personal, instead of focusing on the person's behavior, not being specific enough, giving feedback too long after the incident) (being intimidated by the idea of receiving feedback, feeling threatened instead of welcoming it as a gift, not having an open mind, becoming defensive, not having a good, trusting relationship with the person who provides the feedback.

Cycle of feedback



Asking for feedback

Mentors may need to encourage their mentees to ask for feedback, discuss with them what to expect from feedback, and talk with them about the importance of feedback in the mentoring relationship (Negotiating Phase). Mentees, who take the initiative and ask for feedback, can often accelerate their learning.

Find out what kind of feedback your mentee likes (direct, gentle, how to improve, etc.).

Mentors model good feedback practice by asking for feedback on their mentoring and on their feedback skills. Model the importance of feedback by regularly asking “How are we doing?” Ask about the relationship, the learning process, and progress toward meeting learning goals.

Questions you might ask your mentee:

- *Ask “Was my feedback helpful in improving your skills?”*
- *“What else might I have done to make that feedback even more useful to you?”*
- *“What specific support do you need from me right now?”*
- *“Am I offering learning challenges that are pushing you in the right direction? Are they challenging enough? Are they too challenging?”*



Giving feedback

Describe the context, the behavior, and its impact. Be precise when you describe the behavior. Also, be specific and descriptive (it is less helpful to your mentee if you just say “That was great,” or “That didn’t really work for me.” It is better to be more specific: “Your report gives some good facts and figures and I think it would benefit from being more succinct.”)

Giving feedback to someone is an act of caring. It is not simply a matter of offering advice or constructive criticism. To be meaningful, it must be relevant, practical, timely, and specific. The way it is delivered affects how it is received, so it needs to be well framed. This means setting a context for the feedback and directing the feedback toward something that can be changed: “Marie, I really appreciated all the links and resources that you sent my way after our last mentoring meeting. I know you worked hard to put it together for me and I really appreciate it. I need to tell you that I have always been a slow reader, and it just takes me more time to go through resources that require lots of reading. I usually keep that info to myself but I felt I needed to tell you. I do much better with the crib notes and more succinct information.”

- Offer feedback when it is most timely and relevant:
- Share observations and provide examples
- Show compassion, be nonjudgmental
- Balance negative feedback with positive feedback over time. People tend to remember negative feedback more than positive. Make sure to also notice when your mentee does things well
- Check for understanding and agreement
- Be respectful of differences

Receiving feedback

When receiving feedback, bear in mind these tips:

- Consider the feedback a gift. Remember that the person giving you feedback is taking a risk. His goal is to help you. Encourage more feedback by thanking your feedback-giver.
- Seek to understand, not to agree, justify, or defend. You have good reasons to behave the way you do. The purpose of the feedback exchange is not to discuss those reasons but to understand the impact of your behavior. You can debate an opinion, but when it comes to appreciating the impact of your behavior, all you can do is understand how others have perceived it.
- Listen, ask probing questions, and reformulate. To understand, the best tactic is to listen actively. You may also ask probing questions and reformulate what has been said. Reformulation allows you to think, ensure you have understood what was said, and reinforce a sense of connection with your feedback-giver.

- Avoid responding to feedback when you are angry, defensive, or need more time to process it.
- Ask for time to get the information you need. “To be honest with you, I need to think about that a little more.” “I think I was hoping for a bit more support from you.”
- Continuously link progress and learning to the big picture and the journey and learning goals. “I have been focusing on the goal of . . . and your feedback helps me see a pattern I have developed that is getting in the way.”

While it may be difficult for you to ask questions or ask for examples of how your behavior had negative effects on others, it is worth the time and courage to ask. Paraphrasing, or repeating in different words, what you heard is a good way to make sure that your interpretation of what was said matches the intention of the person giving the feedback. Whether you are receiving reinforcement or redirection always be sure that future plans are included in the discussion. Never leave a discussion without having agreed on a future course of action.

It takes courage to give another person direct, honest feedback. Show the other person that you value his or her effort, as well as the time they took to prepare and present the feedback.

Accepting feedback

- Take time to digest the feedback
- Think about the positive messages you heard
- Reflect on surprising messages
- Catch yourself being defensive
- Discuss your insights



Acting on Feedback – Mentee

- Focus on your goals and priorities
- Check in with yourself periodically to determine how you are doing.
- Continuously look for ways to integrate what you've learned from the feedback you received.

Acting on Feedback – Mentor

- Set a time for the two of you to reconvene to talk about the feedback, or
- Ask the mentee to come back at a later date with a suggested action
- Ask the mentee for their ideas of what they might do differently
- Ask challenging questions to help the mentee develop new ways of thinking or acting
- Suggest ideas based on what has worked for others in overcoming similar problems

