

# WORKING

## Taming the Feedback Nightmare

The five components of effective feedback.

By Tora Estep

In college, I had a housemate who constantly left food to spoil in the refrigerator. Given that I was too poor to afford more than Ramen noodles to eat, this was upsetting because of the terrible state of the refrigerator and because I was hungrily witnessing food rot. Rather than talk to him about it, I kept my mouth shut and stewed. Over time, I grew so angry with repressed emotions, I couldn't look at the guy. I don't know how long that went on, but one day near the end of our lease—and the household tensions—I finally managed

to look him in the face. Imagine my shock when I barely recognized him: He'd grown a full beard since the last time I had seen his face! I almost dropped my bowl of noodles.

While that story doesn't say much about my social skills in college, it says a lot about the importance of giving feedback, lest you find yourself with a hirsute housemate you don't recognize. Giving and receiving feedback doesn't have to be painful. But when it is, it doesn't have to be a waste of time and emotion. Feedback can be an opportunity for growth.

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In “Mastering the Art of Feedback,” *Infoline* No. 250308, authors Holly DeForest, Pamela Largent, and Mary Steinberg stress that feedback “should not be offered to judge, to belittle, or to control; instead it should help recipients see themselves as others see them and present them with an opportunity to learn.” Clearly the painful part is seeing yourself as others see you, which is why respect for both the giver and the receiver lies at the heart of effective feedback.

Feedback comes in two varieties: corrective and reinforcing. To illustrate the corrective variety, here’s the story of newlyweds Connie and George (a true story, although the names have been changed for their protection). For their first meal together, Connie made macaroni and cheese. Problem was, Connie had never cooked anything in her life before, so she wasn’t aware she had to boil the macaroni first. As George crunched through his meal, he realized he’d have to give Connie some feedback on her cooking (or else eat a lot of uncooked pasta). How to do that effectively?

**Consideration.** The first component of giving feedback is showing consideration. George realized that critiquing their first meal together might hurt her feelings, so he would have to approach her with the intent of helping her, not belittling her. To be successful, he’d have to withhold judgment about the behavior. Withholding judgment involves two “don’ts” and one “do”:

- Don’t evaluate.
- Don’t assume intent.
- Do describe specifics.

**Timing.** George would have to pick the right time for giving the feedback. Although giving feedback as close to the time of the behavior as possible is best, he

judged that giving feedback during or just after the meal would be inappropriate given the emotion of the occasion. Giving feedback also might not be appropriate when the setting isn’t right. For example, if George and Connie had been in public, the setting definitely wouldn’t be right.

**Obligation.** Another important component in giving effective feedback is recognizing that the receiver isn’t obligated to change in response to the feedback. The receiver, however, also needs to understand the consequences of not changing. Thus, Connie is free to decide she doesn’t want to boil the macaroni, but George should make her aware that he will probably eat out a lot.

**Readiness.** Ideally, George’s next step would be to check for Connie’s mental, emotional, and physical readiness before giving her feedback. But the circumstances for giving feedback are rarely ideal. Sometimes the giver must give feedback whether or not the receiver wants to hear it; that’s especially true if safety or job performance is an issue. If Connie doesn’t want to hear George’s feedback, he needs to ask himself why he wants to give her the feedback. If he’s angry because he is hungry or he broke a tooth on hard macaroni, he won’t be giving Connie feedback, he will be sounding off.

**Clarity.** This is the final component of giving effective feedback. Clarity ensures better outcomes. A receiver can misinterpret feedback because of high emotion, previous experiences with feedback, and plain lack of clarity on the part of the giver. To ensure clarity, George should ask Connie to explain to him what she thinks he’s trying to say and encourage her to seek confirmation from others.

Giving effective feedback is a skill that you have to prepare for and practice. It was a skill I didn’t have back in my college days, but maybe if I did I wouldn’t have been in for such a hairy surprise!

To order “Mastering the Art of Feedback,” *Infoline* No. 250308, visit [infoline.astd.org](http://infoline.astd.org).

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