

FEEDBACK IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Constructive feedback requires more than one-way communication. Here are the three main elements of effective, two-way feedback exchanges, as well as a self-assessment tool for determining training needs.

BY HARRIET V. LAWRENCE AND ALBERT K. WISWELL

How many times have you heard somebody say, "Give me some feedback," or "Did you get any feedback yet?"

We often ask for feedback when we mean, "Talk to me," "Tell me what you think," or "Is there something I need to know?" But some receivers and senders of such messages don't really understand the essence of feedback. Many people lack the necessary skills for using feedback to achieve personal or professional goals. They use one-way feedback, believing that they are engaging others in constructive exchanges.

To be effective, feedback needs to be two-way, engaging, responsive, and directed toward a desired outcome.

Three elements of two-way feedback

Behavioral research studies over the past 40 years have isolated three key characteristics of feedback. We can classify them as specificity, empathy,

and inquiry. The three elements represent key feedback skills that trainers can effectively teach and assess. When employees apply these skills in the workplace, the result can be a measurable change in the work environment.

Specificity. Most descriptions of effective feedback emphasize this rule: the less specific the feedback, the weaker its impact. Feedback that is not specific can cause misperceptions, misunderstandings, and a general lack of agreement on both sides of the feedback exchange.

Specificity depends on descriptive information that refers as much as possible to actual behavior. Feedback that is specific avoids abstractions, perceived attitudes, and personal traits of the person it discusses. It is accurately detailed. And it is factually verified and documented.

Specific feedback can be either positive (reinforcing) or negative (correcting). Both kinds of feedback can be constructive.

For example, you may think that

you are providing positive, reinforcing feedback when you tell a co-worker, "You did a good job." But your co-worker may have no clue about what you mean; the feedback is not specific enough.

The receiver of the message, "You did not do a good job," is no better off. This time, the message is a negative one—a correction. But it is not definitive, engaging, responsive, or goal-directed.

The initiator of a feedback message should collect, evaluate, and share specific data in order to describe a situation, good or bad, that has occurred. But most people tend to deliver one-way messages—such as "Juan, that plan is not going to work," or "We're sorry, Mary, but we can't use your idea"—and then to feel no responsibility toward the receiver to fill in the details.

The person receiving feedback can enhance the exchange by being explicit, engaging, responsive, and goal-directed on his or her own behalf.

For example, on the receiving end of the nonspecific feedback about his plan, Juan might counter with, "Are there any features about the plan that you can use?" or "Can you offer some guidance that would help me redirect the plan?" Mary could respond in simi-

lar ways to the negative feedback about her idea. She might ask, "Can you fill me in on what you are looking for?" or "Can we clarify your needs and come up with some ideas together?" Feedback becomes the responsibility of both parties; both can use it for gain-

ing insights or improving behaviors.

But the use of specific feedback does carry risks. Some people avoid it because they are afraid of exposing a lack of knowledge or of being unable to support their views. Feedback is most helpful when it is task- or problem-oriented, when it describes preferred behaviors, and when it outlines problem-solving action plans.

For example, it is not helpful for a supervisor to say, "Your writing looked like chicken scratches to the printer, so he sent it back. Redo it and send it back immediately in order to make the deadline." Instead, the supervisor could say, "I'm concerned about how legible your handwritten remarks on the first page appeared to the printer. Type or print your remarks so that they are clear and return your report to the printer by noon today."

The second example gives the employee directions in behavioral terms. Such feedback is harder to deny. It leaves less room for distortion and misunderstanding.

Empathy. People who see each other as understanding and supportive are more open to exchanging feedback. The second element of effective feedback reflects the interpersonal aspects of the process. Empathy adds a dimension of trust to a feedback exchange. Listening is at the center of empathy, which promotes the sharing of perspectives.

For example, the editor of a staff newsletter loudly delivered negative feedback in front of others, appearing insensitive to an employee's feelings. Her comments were specific, but they lacked empathy: "I can't use your article in the newsletter. I don't understand the headline, and you have two misspelled words on the first page alone."

People who display em-

Feedback Self-Assessment

For each statement, check "rarely," "sometimes," or "often," to describe how consistently you use the described behavior in the workplace.

| | Rarely | Sometimes | Often |
|---|--------|-----------|-------|
| 1. I pick the right time and place to give feedback. | | | |
| 2. I limit my feedback to specific skills others can do something about. | | | |
| 3. I avoid one-way feedback by inquiring about what concerns others. | | | |
| 4. I provide positive as well as negative feedback to motivate others. | | | |
| 5. I provide people with time to question the feedback I give them in group meetings. | | | |
| 6. When giving feedback, I focus on tasks and behaviors, not personalities. | | | |
| 7. I encourage two-way feedback to clarify what people need to know. | | | |
| 8. I avoid "saving up" criticisms to deliver all together at one time. | | | |
| 9. I try to understand feedback from the other person's point of view. | | | |
| 10. I avoid giving feedback if I am angry, busy, or tired. | | | |
| 11. I refrain from using sarcasm to prove my point. | | | |
| 12. I encourage others to ask questions; I do not rush them or interrupt them. | | | |
| 13. I provide detailed, nonverbal feedback—using written directions or instructions. | | | |
| 14. I help people understand the feedback I give them, especially when they are upset. | | | |
| 15. I promote feedback in a team setting, to encourage interaction among team members. | | | |
| 16. I empower others by asking for their ideas and suggestions. | | | |
| 17. I listen patiently to the needs of others. | | | |
| 18. I confirm that others share individual and team goals. | | | |
| 19. I use understandable language for giving directions or providing corrective feedback. | | | |
| 20. I use nonverbal cues (such as smiles, nods, or eye contact) to encourage others to give feedback. | | | |

Scoring. Score the self-assessment test using the following instructions:

- ▶ Assign five points for each statement marked "often."
- ▶ Assign three points for each statement marked "sometimes."
- ▶ Assign one point for each statement marked "rarely."

In general, an overall score of 75 represents a satisfactory level of feedback usage, 85 represents a good level, and 95 or higher represents outstanding, consistent use of the core feedback skills (specificity, empathy, and inquiry) with others.

pathy can put themselves in the place of others. They are sensitive to how another person might think and feel in a particular situation—from that person's frame of reference. People with empathy employ honesty and openness in their relationships. They perceive others as individuals, not as objects or stereotypes.

When senders and receivers of feedback show empathy, they learn to build trust. They share two-way feedback exchanges, with neither party trying to dominate, evaluate, or withdraw.

Empathy is not the same thing as sympathy. Empathy signals constructive understanding through such expressions as, "I understand what you are saying," "I can relate to what's going on," and "How can I help you with this problem?" Sympathy has some of the qualities of empathy. But without the problem-solving dimension of empathic feedback, sympathy can be paralyzing.

Inquiry. Of the three key skills, inquiry is closest to the heart of two-way feedback. Feedback givers and receivers open up communication channels and confirm data when they use such phrases as, "What do you think about my comments?" or "Were my suggestions easy to follow?"

When used in a feedback exchange, inquiry solicits data that can show employees how others perceive and interpret their attitudes and behaviors. Inquiry is open-ended. It tests whether people are hearing what was intended. It seeks to learn whether they understand and agree with the message, or—if they do not agree—what their views actually are.

Using inquiry can be risky. Many people would rather observe than inquire; they may be afraid of exposing a lack of skills or information.

In a stressful personal or professional setting, someone may react defensively to another's actions, tone of voice, and words. Combat this negativity by using open-ended inquiry instead of "why" questions. "Why" questions, which can seem threatening, tend to place people on the defensive. In other words, instead of setting up a defensive climate by asking, "Why weren't you here on time?" a person could say, "We missed our ride because you weren't here on

time. In the future, could you let us know if you won't be able to meet us at the time we agreed on?"

Defensive climates tend to be non-productive; they cause people to focus on criticizing and evaluating in a confrontational way. Supportive climates tend to be more productive; they encourage people to solve problems and seek solutions in a positive way.

When people close their minds and their doors, refusing feedback to others, they are perceived as closed to constructive feedback. Their actions do not support an atmosphere in which all people can share their views and explore their expectations.

Open-ended inquiry can also be used to mediate conflicts. In productive and satisfying climates, people may disagree with each other's ideas

HOW A PERSON DELIVERS FEEDBACK IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT IS SAID

during the give and take of feedback. But they can challenge those ideas. And ideas that are inconsistent with their own experiences and beliefs can lead to new learning—unless those ideas are discounted or disregarded.

Inquiry and feedback often provide new perceptions that conflict with old learning—and can become catalysts for new action and change. When people combine reflective critical thinking and feedback in learning situations, new understanding can lead to positive behavioral change. In this way, two-way feedback supports continuous learning in the workplace.

Other factors in two-way feedback

The responsibility for initiating and responding to feedback extends to those on both sides of the two-way street. When people engage in two-way feedback, inquiry on the part of the sender requires a response from the receiver. That sharing of informa-

tion can lead to several outcomes, helping both parties make decisions, follow directions, correct errors, and confirm beliefs about themselves and others.

A meaningful exchange requires several other elements. The first is credibility. Feedback recipients are more likely to take feedback seriously if it comes from sources they respect—sources they perceive as being credible and trustworthy. Credible sources are people with knowledge, judgment, task familiarity, and the ability to give skillful feedback.

Another important element is timeliness. The person providing the feedback should share it soon after the event that triggered it. That immediacy supports and enables productive change. Critical incidents should not be allowed to multiply without being discussed. When such feedback is finally delivered, the exchange is likely to be explosive.

How a person delivers feedback is as important as what is said. A skillful feedback provider avoids blaming people for factors they cannot change—such as personality traits.

Unfortunately, many people lack the skillfulness to say what they want to say in the best way. Instead of asking for and giving specific, informative feedback (in other words, using specificity, empathy, and inquiry), many people communicate from either a weak or a strong position, or in a commanding, authoritarian manner—perhaps to compensate for a feedback-skills deficit.

For example, people who tend to be submissive may be unwilling to engage others by raising issues of disagreement. Instead, they might be ambiguous or overly positive, in order to cover a lack of skills in using feedback to explore what they are really thinking and feeling.

Barriers to effective feedback

Supervisor/subordinate relationships can erect barriers to useful feedback exchanges. Those barriers result from the inherent imbalance of power, influence, and decision making in such relationships.

For example, bosses may think two-way feedback is not necessary; instead of opening the door to two-way feedback, many supervisors

direct feedback downward—one way. On the other hand, many subordinates feel too intimidated to request two-way feedback from their superiors.

Other problems and issues arise between people who feel as if they are competing with each other. Whether justified or not, many employees are afraid of asking for feedback about their behavior, because they don't want to uncover errors that might cause them embarrassment or loss of face.

Certain dilemmas can also crop up in interactions between individual peers and colleagues:

- ▶ One or both parties may think the feedback is unnecessary and they have nothing to learn from each other.
- ▶ Both people might think that someone else is going to provide the feedback data.
- ▶ The parties feel so competitive with each other that their low trust levels prohibit the sharing of information. In other words, they feel driven to protect their information and their turf.

Other kinds of barriers affect groups instead of individuals, preventing useful feedback exchanges between groups of people.

For example, two-way feedback may suffer because of a perceived imbalance of power between groups that have different levels of experience or seniority, or between team leaders and team members. In self-directed work teams and other types of work groups, diversity issues and acculturation of new group members may interfere with effective feedback.

In some teams, open feedback exchanges are simply not an accepted practice in meetings and interactions. Such a climate does not encourage the supportive interpersonal bonds that build synergistic groups—bonds that are crucial to the effective use of two-way feedback.

Skills training is a helpful step toward increasing effectiveness during the two-way process of giving and receiving feedback. Assessing a person's training needs is a good

starting point for raising employees' awareness of their own skills. The accompanying "Feedback-Skills Assessment" can also help people obtain some risk-free feedback. ■

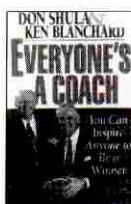
Harriet Lawrence is an adjunct professor of management and HRD at National-Louis University and is president of Management by Communication, 11138 Byrd Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030; 703/691-0622. **Albert Wiswell** is an associate professor in adult continuing education and HRD at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's Northern Virginia Graduate Center, 2990 Telestar Court, Falls Church, VA 22042; 703/698-6049.

To purchase reprints of this article, please send your order to ASTD Customer Service, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043. Use priority code FIM. Single photocopies, at \$10 each, must be prepaid. Bulk orders (50 or more) of custom reprints may be billed. Phone 703/683-8100 for price information.

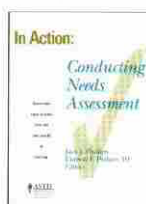
The ASTD Bookshelf—What Trainers are Reading



Consulting 101: How to Succeed as a Training Consultant by Joel Gendelman—Gain practical advice on all aspects of "going solo." You'll learn how to set up an office, secure clients, run your business, and why being a consultant is worth the effort. Order Code GECC, ASTD Members: \$15, nonmembers: \$20.



Everyone's a Coach: You Can Inspire Anyone to Be a Winner by Don Shula and Ken Blanchard—Explore the motivational and management techniques of the most successful coach in NFL history, and learn how to apply them to your own team. Order Code SHEA, ASTD Members: \$20, nonmembers: \$22.



In Action: Conducting Needs Assessment edited by Jack J. Phillips and Elwood F. Holton—This latest addition to the *In Action* series focuses on case studies in needs assessment from companies like Kraft General Foods, AT&T Universal Card, and 15 others. Order Code PHNA, ASTD Members: \$35, nonmembers: \$50.



1001 Ways to Reward Employees by Bob Nelson—Discover a wide variety of imaginative, low-cost ideas for boosting morale and saying thank you to those who really deserve it. Order Code NEWT, ASTD Members: \$8, nonmembers: \$9.

Shipping and handling is additional.

To order a book, or to request a copy of the *1995-96 ASTD Books Catalog*, please call ☎ 703/683-8100; TDD: 703/683-4323 and tell them **your Priority Code is H5D**.

