

# GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

## What is feedback for?

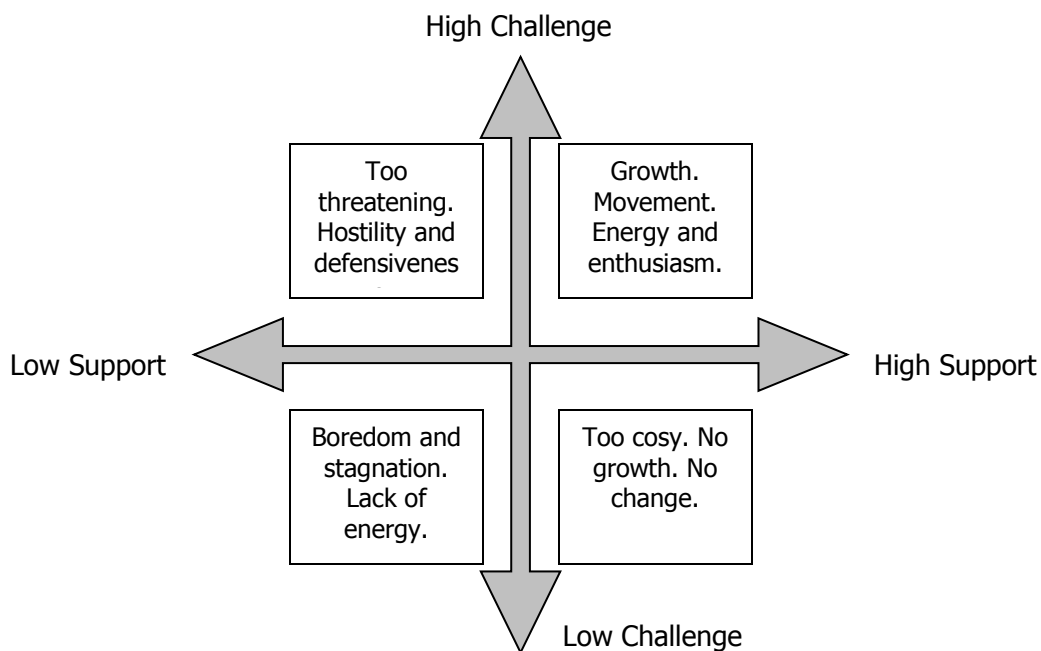
Feedback from others:

- ◆ helps us learn more about ourselves
- ◆ helps us learn more about the effect we have on others
- ◆ offers us new perspectives, insights and options
- ◆ offers the opportunity to change and develop.

For feedback to be useful, two factors need to be in place. These are:

- ◆ Support. Feeding back the positive qualities you observed in the person's behaviour.
- ◆ Challenge. Offering your observations as to the areas you perceive the person could usefully work on.

The following is model illustrates the importance of both of these aspects being in place. It is applicable both in one-to-one situations (tutor-student, student-student, tutor-tutor, therapist-client), as well as to groups.



## Types of feedback.

Feedback varies from that which is constructive to that which is not constructive. The following table contrasts these:

<b>Non-constructive includes feedback that is:</b>	<b>Constructive feedback is:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Judgmental. Blaming.</li> <li>◆ Ridiculing. Shaming. Hostile or cold.</li> <li>◆ Critical of the person rather than their behaviour.</li> <li>◆ Overly-critical.</li> <li>◆ Too nice (not challenging enough).</li> <li>◆ Unbalanced (focuses only on the positives, or too much on challenge).</li> <li>◆ Vague and non-specific.</li> <li>◆ Not 'owned' (i.e. said as an 'I' statement).</li> <li>◆ Challenges things that the person can do nothing about.</li> <li>◆ Is rigid about the right way to do things. Dogmatic. Preaching. Lecturing.</li> <li>◆ Petty.</li> <li>◆ Given without permission.</li> <li>◆ Absent!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Non-judgemental. Not blaming.</li> <li>◆ Given with warmth and compassion.</li> <li>◆ Challenges the behaviour, not the person.</li> <li>◆ Includes challenges ("To not challenge is to not respect").</li> <li>◆ Balanced (includes the positives and the things that could be worked on).</li> <li>◆ Specific - gives examples.</li> <li>◆ Offers suggestions or alternatives.</li> <li>◆ 'Owned' (said as 'I' statements).</li> <li>◆ Challenges only things that the person can act on.</li> <li>◆ Allows for different people to have different styles. Tentative</li> <li>◆ Worth saying.</li> <li>◆ Given with permission.</li> </ul>

### Things that can get in the way of giving feedback.

All of us will have had experiences in the past of being given feedback in a non-constructive (or even destructive) way. Very often this has been the main way we have had modelled to us of giving feedback, particularly in previous educational environments (i.e. school!). So our model of how to give feedback is often not a constructive one; if so we can usefully look at learning the art of giving feedback in a useful way.

Some things that may get in the way of giving supportive feedback can include:

- ◆ *Not noticing the positives.*  
Often our experience in the past has been that only the things that have not been done well are noticed and commented on. We learn to focus only on people's weaknesses, not their strengths.
- ◆ *Taking it for granted that the other person knows.*  
Sometimes people don't know. And even if they do know, they don't know that *you* know and value whatever it is, unless you tell them!
- ◆ *Embarrassment.*

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Maybe you were brought up in an environment where giving praise was laughed at or considered 'soft'; where banter or criticism was the norm, and how you learned to be with others.

◆ *There are things you feel strongly about challenging in the other's behaviour.*

Do you actually want the person to take on board your challenges, or do you just want to have a go at them? The other person is far more likely to be able to take your challenges on board if they are balanced with support.

If you feel *strongly* about wanting to challenge, it is probably useful to wait a bit and instead ask ourselves honestly if this is tapping into stuff of our own. If so, once that has been processed, then we are far more likely to be able to challenge in a constructive manner.

Some things that may get in the way of challenging can include:

◆ *Worrying about upsetting the other person.*

If feedback is given in a constructive way, this is far less likely to happen. If, however, we do genuinely challenge in a constructive way and the other person still gets upset, then it can be worth remembering that this is their stuff - we don't have to take it on board. Also, even if the person is initially upset, chances are that they will come round, if the feedback was given constructively.

◆ *Worry about our own reaction to the other person getting upset or angry.*

If it feels difficult to not take it on board the other person's reaction, then we can take this as useful feedback and insight into our own process, and an opportunity to grow and learn. Maybe we are carrying messages such as "You mustn't upset your mother/father" which, when we look at them, are no longer appropriate and get in the way of us communicating honestly.

It is worth remembering that by not challenging we may:

- ◆ Deprive the person of a learning opportunity. Challenge is necessary for growth.
- ◆ Not be showing the person the respect and credit they deserve. Just because our mother, father, or whoever, couldn't handle challenge doesn't mean that this person can't. maybe they can handle it fine.
- ◆ Risk letting things in us build up until a point is reached where we blow up into an unnecessary confrontation.
- ◆ Damage the relationship by the person sensing that we have withdrawn or are withholding something (after all, *we* can usually sense when someone is not telling us something - so can other people about us!).

### **The skills of giving feedback well.**

Some pointers:

1. Start with the positives. That way the person receiving the feedback is far more likely to be able to receive later challenges.
2. Be specific. Give concrete examples. Avoid being bland or vague.
3. Challenge the behaviour, not the person. For example: "I sensed you were feeling some anger then", rather than "You are obviously an angry person".

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4. Only refer to things that can be changed. It is no use saying: "It would have been better if you were male/female, taller/shorter, had less of an accent", or whatever.
5. Offer alternatives. "I am wondering instead you could have...". Or, "Perhaps it might work to try...".
6. Use 'I' statements. For example: "My own feeling was..." rather than "It is obvious that you..." or "I'm sure everyone else...".
7. Be open to challenge yourself. Maybe you misunderstood what happened. Maybe you are not right.
8. Encourage self-challenge rather than just telling the person what to do. "I am wondering how else you feel you might have done that?" is a lot more useful than "What you need to do is...".
9. Leave the locus of evaluation with the other person. Rather than imposing what you are saying, offer it only as feedback for the other person to consider if they wish.
10. It can be useful to challenge a persons strengths, rather than just the things they are not doing so well. Sometimes we don't see the things we do well - if pointed out, we can own them more and develop them. For example: someone says "I don't feel I did such-and-such well" - the challenge may be "I hear you feel that, and I noticed when so-and-so happened you *did* manage to...". Or: "You know I am crap at..." - the challenge may be "I also noticed that recently you *were* able to...".
11. Listen to the feedback you are giving. What does this tell you about yourself. Own what you may be bringing to it from your own stuff.
12. Avoid challenging when you are plugged into your own stuff. Take time to process your own stuff first.
13. Be congruent. Don't say one thing whilst obviously meaning something else.

### **Receiving feedback.**

Just as most of have issues from past experiences about giving feedback, so to we may have issues about receiving it. The following pointers may be useful (both when receiving feedback ourselves, and to help others with when they are receiving feedback from others):

- ◆ Listen rather than coming back immediately with arguments or justifications. Go away and think about it before replying.
- ◆ Be clear about what exactly is being said. Ask for clarification or examples if you are not sure.
- ◆ Ask for the feedback you want but are not getting.
- ◆ If the feedback you have received feels useful, ground it in action. What can you *do* as result of the feedback? Ask for help with this if necessary.

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