

Effective Feedback Made Easy

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Giving feedback can be tricky. Ann Latham talks us through four steps to eliminate awkwardness and give truly useful comments.



When you try to ride a unicycle, you get immediate, unavoidable, trustworthy feedback every time the unicycle squirts out from under you. Many trials and errors teach you what doesn't work, which is almost everything. With any luck, there is an experienced rider handy to give you some tips. As you try to follow the advice, the unicycle continues to provide feedback. Any progress is obvious - a half revolution, a slower fall, a steady moment, two revolutions, a sense of control in the knees. With enough time and determination, you begin to ride.

As hard as it is to learn to ride a unicycle, it has one huge advantage over most management skills, one huge advantage over learning to manage, motivate, make decisions, run meetings, communicate effectively, and many, many more. And that is: when you ride a unicycle, you know exactly where you stand (or fall).

In contrast, you can manage people, projects, negotiations, and meetings all day long without ever knowing when you are cruising and when you are falling on your face. There is rarely any unavoidable, immediate, and trustworthy feedback to tell you how well you are doing. You may feel like you are communicating well, but how do you know? How do you know where you need to improve? You may see facial expressions during a meeting that make you feel like you are falling on your face, but how do you know? Maybe that person is just having a bad day.

This is why effective feedback is so important. Management and soft skills are much harder to learn than riding a unicycle. If, while developing those skills, we got the same kind of specific and immediate feedback that a unicycle provides, our performance would skyrocket.

Beware the Invisible!

Before learning how to provide feedback effectively, you must be able to differentiate between what is visible and what is invisible, between what is factual and what is opinion. This probably sounds obvious, but if you listen carefully, most statements people make about the performance of others are all opinion. Consider the following fairly typical comments:

- Joe doesn't care about his job.
- Sally is rude to her co-workers.
- Peter is talented and ambitious.

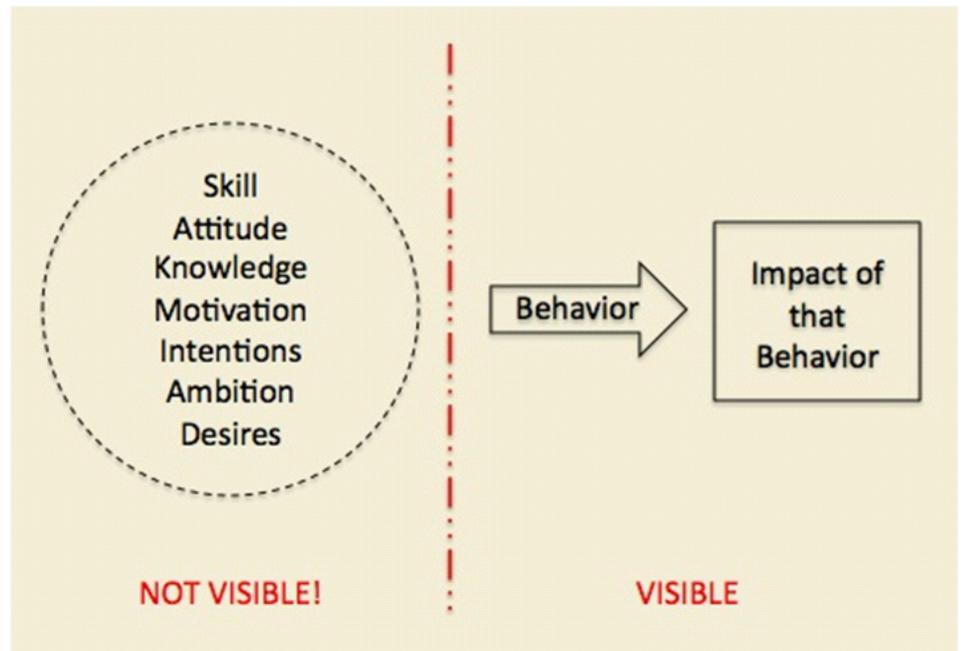
If Joe tells you that he doesn't care about his job, all you know for sure is that he said he doesn't care about his job. Joe may actually care deeply about his job but is afraid to admit it because he knows he is doing badly, and not

caring is a better than being a failure. You can never really know what someone cares about.

So you think Sally is rude. What does 'rude' look like? You can't see 'rude'. Did she interrupt you? You may think that is rude, but the observable fact is simply that she interrupted you. Did she walk away while you were talking to her? You may think that is rude, but she may have been about to vomit. All you know is that she walked away while you were talking to her. Concluding that she is rude is strictly opinion.

Talent and ambition are also invisible. What specifically are you seeing that leads you to conclude that Peter is talented and ambitious? 'He finished the last three projects I gave him ahead of schedule and in each case came looking for more responsibility' is observable and might lead you to assume he is talented and ambitious. To create the illusion of talent and ambition, get some help from the talented and always appear eager for more!

Consider the following diagram.



The circle on the left represents a variety of personal attributes, none of which are visible. The attributes listed here are just examples; this list could be lengthened easily. Statements about these attributes are all opinions. The only thing you can see is an individual's behavior and the results of that behavior. If you are going to provide effective feedback, you must stay focused on the right-hand side of this diagram!

Generalizations are Evil

'Generalizations are evil' is a pretty good lesson in many situations, but especially when giving feedback. Generalizations are almost always false because 'always' and 'never' represent a

level of consistency tough to achieve, no matter who you are or what you are doing. And they are rarely observable, unless you have absolutely nothing else to do.

The minute you make a statement that is false when giving feedback, you are likely to incur the wrath of the person you are trying to help and turn their attention to disputing your claim. Goodbye effective feedback! 'You always interrupt me' would likely be met with 'not true,' whereas 'you interrupted me each of the last five times I opened my mouth,' would likely be met with shocking realization and an apology.

Specificity is Golden

As much as I like to hear that I am fabulous, it is far more helpful to know just what I did to deserve such praise so I can do it again. 'When you told me never to start a meeting without knowing what would be different when it ended, you saved me at least ten hours a week' is far more helpful than general adulation.

With this kind of detail, I know what is worth repeating!

Specificity is equally important when behavior needs significant improvement. 'You are a sloppy worker' would make anyone defensive and miserable without giving them a clue as to what they had done wrong. What you consider sloppy may not even be noticeable to someone else. I remember the first time my husband visited my parent's house. He immediately asked for a hammer and proceeded to pound in a nail that had been protruding from the corner of the stairway for at least twenty years. It had never occurred to the seven of us living

in that house to do anything about that nail. My husband, on the other hand, could not leave that nail sticking out for another minute. You simply can't expect people to perform to a standard of which they are unaware. Be specific about what you see and need if you want to help someone improve.

'Better Late than Never' Does Not Apply

Suppose you are learning to provide feedback more effectively and someone who heard you talking to a co-worker two weeks ago indicated that you made the co-worker defensive. Your brain scrambles to try to recall the situation. Do you agree that the co-worker was defensive? Can you remember what you said? Unless you have a phenomenal memory, late feedback will cause anxiety, but won't help you do a better job the next time around.

'Better late than never' simply does not apply when it comes to giving feedback. The sooner the better is a much better approach. Tell me what I need to do differently and why while the experience is fresh in my mind, and I will learn ten times faster.

Step One - Set the Stage

I am sure you've been in a situation where someone calls you to deliver 'important' news, but your indoor cat was just let out the door, the toilet is overflowing, and your mother is within hearing range. This is not the time to talk about your how to improve your communication style! If you want to provide effective feedback, you must choose the time and the place carefully. If conditions aren't such that the person is feeling receptive, you are just exercising your lungs and jaw muscles. For best results, find a time when you can be alone and uninterrupted, and then ask permission: 'Is this a good time to talk for a few minutes about how that meeting went this morning?'

Step Two - A Formula for Effective Feedback

The formula for effective feedback is really quite simple, if you are careful to avoid the pitfalls described thus far. It goes like this:

When you {specific observed behavior}, it {impact}.

Examples:

When you interrupted me just now, I couldn't help but take it personally.

When you were talking about our priorities in the meeting this morning, your refusal to discuss the two problems raised left me and at least three others feeling like our opinions were unimportant and you didn't understand the significance of our problems.

When you left work early three days in a row without making arrangements to cover the phone, several customers with emergencies were unable to get the help they needed. If we lose their business, the loss will be the equivalent of four annual salaries.

By limiting your comments to specific observed behavior and its impact, you provide a clear, factual picture with undeniable, and often personal, impact. This approach is non-judgmental and opens the door for further discussion and collaborative resolution. This leads to the third component of effective feedback.

Step Three - Collaborate for Success

Once you have described the specific, observed behavior and its impact on you, others, or the company, it is often time to work together on next steps. Since you left all your opinions behind and are focused on the specific observable behavior, you ought to be aware of how little you actually know about the situation you are discussing. You know next to nothing about

their intentions, attitude, obstacles, priorities or knowledge. You ought to be ready to give the benefit of the doubt and learn more about the circumstances. With this mentality, your next step after following the feedback formula would probably be a question in the interest of learning more or offering help. Here are some ideas:

Is everything OK?

Would you like me to show you how I would do it?

Can I help you figure out a better way?

You are a really fast-paced, enthusiastic person. Do you realize that you interrupt people quite often? Since you aren't particularly aware of it, would it be helpful if I gave you some kind of private signal when I see it happen?

Practice Makes Perfect

It is common to feel uncomfortable providing feedback and you may have developed quite a few bad habits that need to be broken to maximize your effectiveness. Focusing on specific observable behavior is probably the biggest. Practice daily to limit all statements about the behavior of others to specific observable behavior. Whether talking about your dog, your children, your employees, or the clerk in the convenience store, avoid opinions. You will know you are making progress when it affects more than your ability to give feedback. It will change the way you see things and the way you think about others.

For help in practicing the feedback process, download my template for planning feedback conversations. Simply visit www.UncommonClarity.com click on Books, Tools, Etc. and select 'Four Steps to Effective Feedback.'

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Ann Latham is a performance improvement expert, master facilitator, and author of *Clear Thoughts – Pragmatic Gems of Better Business Thinking*. Her firm, Uncommon Clarity, Inc., helps clients get dramatically better results faster and with greater confidence. For more information or to subscribe to her free newsletter, please visit www.AnnLatham.com.

