Reality Vet

Just Say It!
How to Give and Receive Feedback that Creates Change.

Kelly Cooper, DVM

What Is Feedback?
Feedback is the process of providing information about a person's performance or behavior with the goal of helping them improve and develop. Honest Effective Feedback = Growth. For people, it's like the sunshine and water plants need to grow.

Why Does Feedback Matter?
When it comes to work, everyone needs to know how to do their job - they need to know what to do and how to do it. Once they've been trained, they then need to know how they are doing. That requires feedback.

Every relationship - be it with family, friends, partners, children, vendors, peers, colleagues, bosses, or employees - comes with an expectation of how the other person will behave. When that expectation is unmet, conflict will arise. The way to get past that conflict is to either let the expectation go, or to give each other feedback to try to achieve the behavior that is expected.

Therefore, feedback is a fundamental need that lets others know "Am I meeting your expectations?" Effective feedback is essential for personal and professional growth. It enhances performance, encourages open communication, identifies strengths and areas for improvement, facilitates learning, and boosts motivation. In other words, feedback is a critical tool that everyone needs, wants, and deserves.

Why Do People Struggle to Give Honest Feedback?
Many people struggle with giving feedback and that includes positive feedback. Giving honest feedback can be challenging, so it's avoided it altogether, which impacts the person who needs the feedback due to blind spots in their performance. Here are some of the reasons for feedback avoidance:

1. Fear of damaging relationships:
   People worry that giving critical feedback may hurt feelings and instead will prioritize maintaining harmony over providing candid input.

2. Avoidance of confrontation:
   Many individuals feel that giving critical feedback is like confrontation and will avoid perceived conflict or difficult conversations.

3. Lack of confidence:
   Some people doubt their ability to provide feedback effectively or fear that the feedback will be misinterpreted or poorly received.

4. Concern about repercussions:
   Some people worry that giving honest feedback could lead to negative consequences, such a damage to their reputation or career prospects, or they fear retaliation and backlash, especially if the feedback is given to a line manager or boss.

5. Cultural or social norms:
   In some cultures, direct feedback may be viewed as inappropriate or impolite. People may feel pressure to conform to norms that discourage candid feedback.

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6. Empathy and compassion:
   People often feel empathy for the recipient and hesitate to deliver feedback that could be perceived as hurtful or demotivating.

7. Lack of skill or practice:
   Giving constructive feedback is a skill that requires practice and finesse. Some people may lack the training or experience to provide feedback effectively and tactfully.

Why Do People Avoid Receiving Feedback?
People fail to seek feedback often for the same reason they fail to give it: fear of perceived harm and protecting themselves. This keeps people in a place of stagnation, not knowing if or how they need to improve.

1. Fear of negative feedback:
   Asking for feedback requires vulnerability and opening oneself up to potential criticism, but many over worry about hearing negative comments about their performance or personal qualities.

2. Threat to self-esteem:
   Feedback, especially critical feedback, can be perceived as a threat to one's self-esteem or self-image. People may fear that negative feedback will undermine their confidence or make them feel inadequate.

3. Imposter syndrome:
   Some individuals may struggle with imposter syndrome, feeling like they are not as capable as others believe them to be and they may avoid seeking feedback for fear of being "exposed" as a fraud.

4. Perfectionism:
   Perfectionists may view feedback as a sign of failure or imperfection and avoid asking for feedback to maintain an illusion of flawlessness.

5. Fear of change or growth:
   Receiving feedback often implies a need for change or growth, and some people may feel comfortable with the status quo and resist feedback that challenges them to develop or improve.

6. Lack of trust:
   Asking for feedback requires trust in the feedback giver. People will hesitate to seek feedback if they don't trust the source.

7. Previous negative experiences:
   Past experiences with poorly delivered or unhelpful feedback may make people reluctant to seek it out again.

8. Cultural or organizational norms:

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In some situations, seeking feedback may be viewed as a sign of weakness or incompetence, so people may avoid asking for feedback to conform to these norms or expectations.

The Two Types of Feedback

1. Positive Feedback:
   These are those "emotional bank account deposits" that you give to others to:
   - acknowledge great results,
   - reinforce great behaviors, and
   - show your appreciation for the individual.

   Done well, positive feedback is very motivating and will build trust, confidence, and self-esteem, as well as reinforce the desired behaviors needed to succeed. Examples of positive feedback are praise, compliments, and rewards.

2. Constructive Feedback:
   Constructive (or critical) feedback focuses on areas that need improvement because the behavior or results did not meet the expectation. These moments can result in "emotional bank account withdrawals" even if intended for the other's benefit or when executed poorly, eroding trust. Constructive feedback is carefully given to:
   - acknowledge poor results,
   - point out gaps in skills or behaviors, and
   - provide direction and support on how to improve.

The Two Ways to Deliver Feedback

Formal Feedback is planned and structured feedback that is usually prepared for, scheduled, and documented. This includes routine performance reviews, performance improvement and correction, and 360-degree feedback sessions. The documentation is usually shared with the person receiving the feedback and placed into the employment record. Formal feedback is useful to discuss trends in performance over time or to deal with more behaviors or results that have a more serious impact on the business.

Informal Feedback happens more often and is less structured. It can be given in-the-moment or shortly thereafter when it has the most impact. It can be spontaneous or planned by the manager but is less structured. While the manager may keep personal notes, documentation is not shared or placed into the employment record.

The more often that feedback is delivered, the more clarity the receiver has about their performance and isn't surprised when more formal, documented feedback, such as an annual performance review, is delivered. This could be through monthly or quarterly check-ins.

Emotional Bank Accounts

The term "emotional bank account" was coined by Stephen Covey in his 1989 book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." It's a metaphor that describes the trust and goodwill built up in relationships. You make "deposits" through positive interactions, such as kindness, loyalty and keeping promises, which includes positive recognition. "Withdrawals" occur when trust is eroded by criticism, neglect, or

betrayal. To build a trusting, resilient relationship be intentional about making more "deposits" than "withdrawals." The accepted rule for positive to constructive feedback is 5:1.

How To Give Effective Feedback

There are several key components to honest, effective feedback, and it takes planning, intention, and practice to build the skill. Be kind to yourself as you learn and grow in this ability because missteps are common as you develop in this area.

- Timing:
  Strike while the iron is hot! Give feedback as soon as possible after the event or behavior, which will help "connect the dots" between the event and feedback. However, don't blindside someone by choosing a moment when they're ready to listen. Prepare them for the feedback before you begin. Ask, "Could I give you some feedback on something I noticed? Is this a good time?" By doing so you respect their ability to engage with you.

- Location:
  Positive feedback can be given publicly unless the receiver prefers private recognition. In almost all circumstances, give constructive feedback privately to avoid distractions or embarrassing the person receiving the feedback. It also shows importance and respect for the moment. An exception to this rule is in group settings for the purpose of delivering feedback to the group or multiple individuals in the group.

- Specificity:
  Ditch the vague comments and give detailed and specific examples. Make sure the feedback is easy to understand and leaves no room for confusion. Focus on actions and behaviors, not personality or character. This is where feedback models come in very handy (see below).

- Balance:
  Effective feedback has a mix of both positive and constructive. Don't always focus on the negative or just the positive and remember the 5:1 rule.

- Offer Support:
  Don't just point out what needs improvement and leave the receiver on their own to figure out what to do differently. Instead, give them actions and ideas on how to make it happen. Be their guide and help them chart a course for success.

- Collaborate:
  Feedback shouldn't feel like a one-way lecture; encourage them to share their thoughts and perspectives and listen actively and be open to their input.

- Follow up:
  Feedback isn't a one-and-done event. Check in regularly to see how they're progressing and offer ongoing support and resources to help them crush their goals. Give immediate feedback when you notice improvement.

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Feedback Models
There are multiple feedback methods and models used to help provide structure to feedback. Here are three common ones:

- SBI (Situation-Behavior-Impact) Feedback:
  - Describe the specific Situation – "When you helped Ms. Jackson this morning..."
  - Identify the Behavior observed – "I noticed you smiled warmly when she came in."
  - Explain the Impact of the behavior – "As a result, she felt welcomed and cared for."

- The STAR Method:
  - Situation: Describe the context – "The last time we worked together on the hospital cases..."
  - Task: Explain the task or goal – "we were tasked with dividing up the caseload."
  - Action: Discuss the actions taken - "I noticed you took the simpler cases to address."
  - Result: Share the outcome or result – "As a result, I had to work late last night."

- The Feedback Sandwich: (This is my least favorite, as it tends to create confusion and the receiver is not sure what they are supposed to improve. It's also not specific.)
  - Start with positive feedback – "You're great at client service."
  - Provide constructive criticism or areas for improvement – "You aren't finishing your records."
  - End with positive feedback or encouragement – "You're really fun to work with."

How To Ask For Feedback:
Receiving effective, quality feedback requires honesty and forethought from giver. That's why when you ask someone spontaneously for feedback, you'll often receive something vague yet positive response (refer to the above section on why people avoid giving feedback). While it might make you feel good, it rarely provides you with something concrete to work with.

When seeking quality feedback, ask a trusted friend, colleague, or advisor. If your boss doesn't provide feedback on a regular basis, ask them for a meeting for just that purpose, which will help you from getting blindsided during the annual review. Whoever you approach, prepare them in advance by sharing specifically what you're working on and would like feedback on. That will prevent the feedback from being too general and vague. Then set up a day and time to have the discussion in a quiet, private location.

In addition to these guidelines, if seeking feedback from individuals that you manage or a team you lead, it's your role to make the process as safe as possible by building trust and a collaborative culture (with many emotional bank deposits). Always remember that giving feedback to the boss or an authority figure, such as a doctor, can be scary and intimidating.

How To Receive Feedback
Whether it's positive or constructive, feedback is a gift, especially honest and effective feedback, so receive it as such.

It's always nice to hear praise and positive recognition. But if you have the habit of waiving it off, it's time to change tactics, because the person who gave it to you wants you to have it in its fullness. Your

full acceptance of the gift is the nicest and most respectful response you can provide. “Thank you” is all that’s needed. Or “Thank you, I appreciate that.”

Unlike hearing praise, which is always great, receiving constructive feedback can difficult because of all the areas mentioned above, and your reaction may be to defend yourself or justify the behavior or actions. When this happens, the feedback giver may not feel heard or valued, and will be unlikely to deliver the feedback again. Do your best to be curious, actively listen and endeavor to understand what is being said without reacting negatively.

Here are some tips on to help you stay curious:

- Say “Thank you for your feedback. I plan to take some time to think about it and get back to you later if I have questions. Will that be okay?”

- Ask for examples or details for clarity, such as “Can you tell me more?” Or say, “Could you share a specific or example of what you mean when you say X?”

Another great behavior is to follow up with the person who gave the feedback to let them know how you used their feedback and what you have changed because of it. This is the best positive reinforcement to let them know you heard and value their gift. This is especially powerful with people you manage.

Summary
In conclusion, feedback is a vital tool for personal and professional growth. Despite the challenges and fears associated with giving and receiving feedback, it’s essential to create a culture that values honest, effective feedback. By using structured delivery methods and keeping a balance of positive and constructive input, you and your organization can cultivate an environment of continuous learning and development.

Embrace feedback as a gift and an opportunity for growth while being mindful of the "emotional bank account" with others, which will build trust and resilient relationships. With practice and intention, you can develop the skills necessary to provide and receive feedback effectively, ultimately contributing to the success and well-being of both you and your team.

Great Reads:
“The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” by Stephen Covey
“Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity” by Kim Scott
“Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High” by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, et al.