



Giving & Receiving Empowering Feedback

Courageous Communication Toolbox

The power and potential of feedback

What comes to mind when you hear the word feedback? Cold chills thinking of hearing hard things about your performance? Awkwardness of sharing negative feedback with a colleague? A yearly routine to be endured? Or frustration at not having a feedback culture where you can voice your concerns? What if instead, we embraced feedback as a key tool to empower ourselves and our teams?

Giving feedback – and receiving feedback – is a crucial skill for leaders and teams. It helps us keep our team cultures thriving and our working relationships healthy and productive. It enables us to grow and develop ourselves, and to support others and our teams to grow into their potential.

How to use this toolbox

In this toolbox we have put together a number of tips, practices, skills and methods for giving and receiving feedback, along with a couple of reflection exercises. All the methods are ones we use in our team feedback processes, which we have adapted over the years to fit our culture and structures. We suggest trying out the methods and checking what supports you and not, and adapting them to make them your own. We hope this toolbox supports you to create more intentional and empowering feedback conversations.

Want to dive deeper?

We offer capacity building workshops for leaders and teams on topics including courageous communication, building team cultures of trust, leading with purpose and values, collective decision-making and more. We also run a **12 week Leadership Journey**, a facilitated program where we take a deep dive into authentic and purposeful leadership.

Every month we run **free online workshops** on our core topics: purposeful leadership, empowered teamwork, regenerative impact evaluation, digital facilitation and more.

Sign up to our newsletter or **follow us on LinkedIn** to stay up to date with future workshops, programs and resources.

Happy feedbacking!

The Unity Effect Team

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Self-Reflection

Before we explore skills and methods for feedback, let's start with your experiences with feedback so far. You are invited to journal on the following questions:

How do you feel about giving feedback?

How do you feel about receiving feedback?

Creating the Conditions for Empowering Feedback

Be clear on the intention

What is the underlying reason for giving feedback? Is it to support the other person's growth, improve your collaboration, or find new solutions to a challenge affecting the team? Having a clear intention helps focus the feedback session. And be honest with yourself: if your intention is to offload some unfiltered frustration, you might need to find another outlet for it before entering into an empowering feedback conversation.

Consider the timing

When in the day makes sense? Perhaps if you need to share some hard feedback, doing it first thing in the morning right before the other person has back-to-back meetings with no time to process it is not the ideal time.

How much time do we need? It's important to create enough space for the feedback conversation to take place in a meaningful way. This means having enough time to respond, ask questions and explore the topic together, as well as having time to process it after.

When in the process does it make sense? Too often we wait until the end of a project to give feedback on what didn't work well, which the other person may not have even been aware of. If we give feedback in a timely manner, there is still the opportunity to change things along the way. Which counts for reinforcing the things that are going well, too.

How often should we have feedback? The longer we leave between feedback talks, the more issues can pile up, building tensions and potentially resulting in a feedback talk which is overwhelming for the recipient. Having feedback as a more regular process allows us to deal with issues as they arise. How often is right for you depends on your context.

Choose the location

Ideally you can find a neutral location for your conversation, where you both (or all) feel comfortable. It's also important to consider if the location is private or not, and ideally choose a private location for more challenging conversations. However, sometimes it can be appropriate to give positive feedback in front of other people to recognise that person more publicly. But consider if this will make them uncomfortable of course!

Preparation

Feedback works best when we are prepared. This includes giving specific examples which capture the dynamic or behaviour we want to give feedback on. When giving examples, focus on things which can actually be changed, and as much as possible, try to focus on facts and withhold judgements about people's behaviours and intentions. Remember that feedback is a reflection of *your* experience of the other person. Therefore, frame it from your perspective and be open to owning your part in the situation.

Trust and psychological safety are the foundation for empowering feedback

The work of creating feedback conversations which are empowering begins long before the conversation itself. The level of trust we have in each other, as well as the level of psychological safety we each have (feeling safe to share our ideas, concerns and be ourselves without fear of being rejected or ridiculed) play an important role in how feedback is given and received.

For example, if you need to share something hard with me, and I know that you trust and appreciate me and my work, it will be much easier for me to listen to the hard thing you need to share. And if I feel safe with you, I can share my own experience honestly, rather than getting defensive or shutting off.

Engaged Feedback Checklist

From '[Dare to Lead](#)' by Brené Brown, 2018

I know that I'm ready to give feedback when...

1. I'm ready to sit next to you rather than across from you.
2. I'm willing to put the problem in front of us rather than between us (or sliding it toward you).
3. I'm ready to listen, ask questions, and accept that I may not fully understand the issue.
4. I'm ready to acknowledge what you do well instead of picking apart your mistakes. I recognize your strengths and how you can use them to address your challenges.
5. I can hold you accountable without shaming or blaming.
6. I am open to owning my part.
7. I can genuinely thank someone for their efforts rather than criticize them for their failings.
8. I can talk about how resolving these challenges will lead to growth and opportunity.
9. I can model the vulnerability and openness that I expect to see from you.

Key Skills to Practice in Feedback Conversations

Curiosity

Curiosity might sound like a somewhat 'easy' attribute. Yet when we are in a place of blaming someone or feeling ashamed, stressed, overwhelmed or angry, it is way harder to access our curiosity. We have to be willing to get outside of our own story and see things through another lens, considering that there might be a different way of seeing the situation. We have to put down the defences and open ourselves up to challenge our underlying assumptions and beliefs in the situation.

One of the key tools for practising curiosity are questions. It can be as simple as *'can you tell me more about your experience in this situation?'.* We can practice seeking to first understand the other person's perspective and experience before we respond too quickly out of defence and opposition, thereby missing the chance to understand, connect and explore solutions together.

Appreciation

When we believe that the other person is doing their best and has good intentions, we can have a completely different experience of their behaviour in a situation than if we believe they don't have good intentions. Looking through the lens of appreciation helps us focus on the things that are working well that we want to see more of, rather than only focusing on what is not working. If we feel appreciated and valued, it is also easier to receive feedback that is harder to hear.

Listening

Listening is a key skill for effective feedback and supports curiosity and empathy. It is also an ongoing practice and requires us to pay attention to our own patterns of communication. Often when we listen we are already preparing the next thing we want to say in our head, or are quick to jump in with advice, opinions or ideas. The invitation is to play with being fully present with the other person and giving them the space to feel heard and share what is really important to them.

Skilled descriptiveness

In his book *Clear Leadership*, Gervase R. Bushe explores 'skilled descriptiveness' as a key skill for engaging in learning conversations and delivering feedback effectively. The goal is to describe your experience of a situation, recognising that we each have our own unique experience and cannot know each other's experience unless we describe it. This approach, similar to non-violent communication, includes:

- *Sharing observations without judgements*: what are the objective facts in the situation?
- *Describing feelings without expressing them*: for example, sharing that you feel angry, rather than yelling at the other person.
- *Expressing needs without making others responsible for them*: it is helpful to be clear on what you need in a specific situation, yet if you make a request of the other person, be ready to accept a yes or no response. Otherwise it is a demand.

Empathy

According to Brené Brown, empathy is about *feeling with* the other person and consists of 5 skills:

- To see the world as others see it, or perspective taking
- To be nonjudgmental
- To understand another person's feelings
- To communicate your understanding of that person's feelings
- Mindfulness

"Empathy has no script. There is no right way or wrong way to do it. It's simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting, and communicating that incredibly healing message of 'you are not alone.'"

Brené Brown

Feedback Methods

Group Feedback

This is a method for giving and receiving feedback in a group. It is a powerful way to air issues collectively, to put things out in the open and look at them together, recognising that patterns and dynamics which play out may affect more than one person in the team, or may be created by more than two people.

How it works

There will be a feedback round for each person who is present.

For each round, everyone else will have a few minutes to share feedback with the person whose turn it is (or longer, depending on how much time you have and how many people are in the group).

Either: take a minute or two before each round begins to take notes on what you want to share, or prepare before the meeting.

Focus on what you appreciated about that person recently, and what things have been challenging that you wish would be different.

During the sharing round, another person in the group takes notes. At the end of the round, the person receiving feedback has a chance to respond.

Then repeat the process with the next person.

Adapted from the [Loop Approach](#) by Sebastian Klein and Ben Hughes.

Feedback Methods

Retrospectives

Retrospectives are a tool for team reflection and feedback which comes from the world of agile working methods. An agile team plans and works on projects in sprints: a short period of time in which the team sets out to accomplish a set amount of work. The retrospective occurs at the end of the sprint to evaluate what went well, what didn't go well, and what to do differently next time, with a focus on continuous improvement.

Regardless of whether you work with agile methods or not, the retrospective is a valuable tool for team reflection and collective feedback.

How it works

Start by defining the scope of the reflection. Is it for the last 3 weeks or last 2 months? Is it for a specific project or more general? It can be helpful to limit the scope to keep it as concrete as possible.

Choose a method for reflection. It works well to use post-its (e.g. on a digital whiteboard) to collect responses for the different questions, then reflect together on the outcomes.

Go through the following questions together:

- What worked well?
- What didn't work well?
- Ideas for going forward: what can we improve?
- Appreciation: share appreciation with teammates for things that happened in the scope of the retrospective.

An alternative to these questions is the 4 L's:

- What did you like?
- What was lacking?
- What did you learn?
- What do you long for going forward?

More information can be found [here](#).

Feedback Methods

Empathy Walk

Movement can be a great catalyst for insights, creativity and fresh perspectives.

Take a walk together in pairs, between 30 mins to 1 hour. It is helpful to pose a specific question to guide you.

Each of you has half the time to speak while the other listens. The listener may ask questions and reflect back insights & observations, yet their main task is to listen from the heart without judgement.

If there is nothing to be said, you may also walk in silence.

Courageous Conversation Tools

From [‘Dare to Lead’](#) by Brené Brown, 2018

Circle back

Circling back gives us the opportunity to revisit a conversation or interaction after we’ve had time to fully process. This can include if we need more information or clarification; to make amends for something we did or for not fully listening; or if we find ourselves feeling defensive or needing time to think in the middle of a difficult conversation.

E.g. I need to think about this. Can we circle back in an hour? I don’t like how I showed up in that meeting. Can we circle back?

Time-out

Taking a Time-out refers to taking a break when things get difficult during a meeting or conversation, for example taking ten minutes for everyone to walk around outside or catch their breath. Everyone on the team should be empowered to call a time-out.

Feedback Methods

Feedforward

Research undertaken by Avi Kluger of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, shows that feedback, even positive feedback, can reduce performance. In feedback the focus is on telling someone what worked well – or not – in the past. An alternative to feedback is feedforward, which centres on listening and asking facilitating questions. Feedforward focuses on what we want to carry forward, by looking at the conditions which supported something (a situation, action, feeling) to happen, not the thing itself.

How it works

This process can be used as a conversation, or as a journaling exercise.

Ask the person to share a story about a specific moment where things were working well.

It should be a story they would be willing to experience again.

Depending on the context, you can ask for a moment of great teamwork, great leadership, a moment where they felt full of life, or anything else which is relevant.

Ask them to share how they felt in the peak moment. What were their thoughts, feelings, physical reactions, etc.

Ask them to share the conditions which allowed this story to happen.

This includes the conditions:

- In themselves
- In others
- In the environment, organisation, timing, etc.

You can then invite them to reflect on how present these conditions currently are for them.

More information can be found [here](#).

Reflection Exercise: Feedforward on Feedback

Bring to mind a moment of empowering feedback. This does not have to be 'positive' feedback only, but a moment where feedback was effective. It could be a moment where you were giving or receiving feedback.

What were the conditions in you which enabled this moment to happen?

What were the conditions in others?

What were the conditions in your environment?

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