GIVING, RECEIVING, AND USING FEEDBACK

OVERVIEW

Learning depends on feedback: we try something, figure out whether it works, and use the feedback we received to make it better. Researchers like John Hattie have identified feedback as one of the highest-impact teaching strategies we can use with students, but feedback also matters for adult learning.

The problem is that many adults have become allergic to feedback in professional situations, and as a result, many of our organizations are structured so that many of us rarely or never get any feedback on our work. This makes learning and improvement a slower and more difficult process than it needs to be. But by paying attention to giving, receiving, and using feedback, we can all get better at it. And when feedback is actually useful, people turn out to be hungry for it. It helps to think about three kinds of feedback.

WARM FEEDBACK is the kind of feedback that all of us like to receive and that is easiest to give. Every feedback session should start with a positive statement about something! The more specific this is, the better: a general "Good job" is far less helpful for learning than "I thought the way you began the presentation was really effective." If you can add something about why, then warm feedback is even more useful. Warm feedback is not just an effort to be nice; it is the way the person giving the feedback lets the person receiving it feel that he or she has been seen and understood. This step lays the foundation for more challenging feedback.

COOL FEEDBACK is the kind that raises a question: "I wonder what would have happened if you had...." Learning to ask good questions is an important part of learning to give good feedback. The good thing about this kind of feedback is that it doesn't always require expertise: the naive question that comes from a novice observer can often be more helpful that an expert critique. Sometimes, "I wondered how you got from step three to step four" may be very useful feedback.

FEEDBACK RELATIVE TO A SET OF STANDARDS: Standards-based feedback is exactly what the name implies: it is an assessment of how the product or performance relates to a set of standards. Some writers call this hard feedback, and it an be difficult to hear when the standard is a high one. The key element of standards-based feedback is not that the product or performance was strong or weak, but rather that it met or fell short of a standard that is both understood and shared by the performer and the reviewer. Those who listen to feedback feel misjudged and misunderstood if they don't understand or don't share the standard that lies behind the reviewers' comments.

THE CHALLENGES OF GIVING GOOD FEEDBACK

Challenge #1: Observe carefully

Good feedback depends on careful, detailed, and objective observation of the product or performance that is to be the subject of the feedback. This is much harder than it sounds: we all have opinions about everything, and it is hard for us to put them aside long enough to really read the document, watch the lesson, or pay attention to the presentation. The advice "Seek first to understand" is essential. Then, if we've really paid attention, it will be easy to find the element that we appreciated most as well as the one that raised a question in our minds. Richard Elmore's writing on instructional rounds has a lot to say about how to do this, and it doesn't apply just to the rounds process.

Challenge #2: Be specific

Careful observation makes it much easier to provide detailed and specific feedback. This is essential both because the generic praise "Way to go!" doesn't help anyone learn anything, but more importantly, no one listens to feedback about gaps or misses unless they have the feeling that the observer saw what they were trying for and what they really did accomplish.

Challenge #3: Do ask good questions (and avoid bad ones)

Good questions come in many forms. Clarifying questions are usually questions of fact: "Who did you talk to before making that decision?" Inventory questions are questions about what is going on: "Which other instructional strategies have you tried with this group of students?" Pushing questions are ones that ask the listener to articulate their thinking, make a prediction, or think more deeply about something: "What do you think might happen if you asked the question this way?" Or, "How else might you have begun your presentation?" And, though sometimes we're told that "there are no bad questions," when you are trying to give someone feedback, avoid questions that contain a thinly disguised negative judgment, trick questions to which you know the answer and suspect the listener doesn't, or questions that are really statements. Remember that feedback depends on what Carol Dweck calls a "growth mind-set," the belief that everybody can learn and improve.

Challenge #4: Listen as a learner

Often, we act as if the entire challenge is about giving good feedback. But hearing and using good feedback is also a skill. The temptation—and everybody feels it—is to feel defensive and try to explain. But that's not the point. The job of the listener is to find something in the feedback to learn from. If some of the feedback seems off base to you, ignore it. You are prospecting for the nugget of gold buried in those comments! Anyone who says about a feedback session that "I didn't get anything out of that" may be saying far more about their skills and attitudes as a learner than they are about the feedback.

PRACTICE USING A FEEDBACK PROTOCOL

Protocols are ways of scripting processes that don't—or don't yet—come naturally. People often resist protocols because they feel unnatural, but that's actually the point. So don't give up: the more you use a good protocol, the more you will get out of it. A basic feedback protocol might look like this:

Step one: Observation. Read the essay, watch the lesson or presentation, review the artifact. Pay close attention. Take notes about what you see or notice, not what you think about it. This step is worth practicing.

Step two: Clarifying questions. The goal here is for the person giving the feedback to make sure they understand the facts of the matter. The answers to clarifying questions are typically short.

Step three: Warm or appreciative feedback. Remember the goal of helping the presenter feel seen. Good sentence stems might be "I appreciated…," "I noticed…," ""I especially valued…," and "It really helped me when you…."

Step four: Cool feedback. Some protocols structure this step as a conversation among the observers, and this approach often works well. This makes it easier for the observers to raise a question or issue without feeling that they are confronting or challenging the presenter, and it allows the presenter to listen without feeling they have to explain or defend themselves.

Step five: Standards-based feedback. If the performance, product, or presentation is something that both presenter and observers are all working on, and something for which there exists a shared picture of excellence, this step works well as a conversation. If the standard is not completely clear, or not fully shared or understood, that doesn't mean you have permission for a standards-free conversation! Instead, it puts the responsibility on the observer to articulate the standard he or she is using: "When I watch a lesson, I always try to see whether the African American boys seem to be engaged." Or, "When I attend a meeting, I always want to know why we are there and what we are trying to accomplish." These sentences reflect standards, and they can become the basis for useful feedback.

Step six: Reflection. If the listener learned something in the feedback process, it will help cement the lesson in her mind if she is asked to articulate it. Similarly, if a reviewer learned something (about either the process or content of the feedback session), it is worthwhile to have him describe his insights as well. Often, we skip this step. Don't.

To take part in the feedback protocol, educators bring samples of either their own work or that of their students. Teachers may bring lesson plans or student essays, a professional developer or coach might bring a plan for a workshop or presentation, and a principal might bring a staff-meeting agenda or parent newsletter. An ILT staff member might present his or her work plan for the year.

Usually, a facilitator guides the group through the process and keeps time. The presenter(s) begin by describing the context for the work, uninterrupted by questions or comments from participants.

Often, the presenter will pose a focusing question or area about which she would especially welcome feedback—for example, "Are you seeing evidence of persuasive writing in the students' work?" Participants have time to examine the work product and ask clarifying questions. Then, with the presenter listening but silent, participants offer warm and cool feedback—both supportive and challenging. Presenters often frame their feedback as a question—for example, "How might the project be different if students chose their research topics?"

After this feedback is offered, the presenter has the opportunity, again uninterrupted, to reflect on the feedback and address any comments or questions she chooses. Time is reserved for debriefing the experience. Both presenting and participating educators have found the experience to be a powerful stimulus for encouraging reflection on their practice.

1. Introduction (5 minutes)
The facilitator briefly introduces protocol goals, guidelines, and schedule.

2. Presentation (15 minutes)
The presenter has an opportunity to share the work, including describing the context for the work and the assignment or situation that prompted it, and to pose a question about which he or she would like feedback. If there are established standards for this piece of work, the presenter shares these. Listeners take notes.

3. Clarifying Questions (5 minutes)
Participants have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions.

4. Warm and Cool Feedback (15 minutes)
Participants engage in a conversation with each other while the presenter listens silently. Each participant shares both warm and cool feedback. Cool feedback often takes the form of questions. Suggestions about how the work might be strengthened or what the next level of work might be for the group or organization are usually framed as questions as well.

5. Standards-Based Conversation (10 minutes)
All engage in a conversation about how the work presented helps the group move toward a shared set of goals (e.g., CCSS implementation) or responds to a shared standard (e.g., a rubric for student work or the ILT rubric).

6. Reflection (5 minutes)
The presenter reflects on what he or she is taking away from the discussion. The entire group closes with a reflection on how the feedback protocol went and what they learned about giving and receiving feedback.

FEEDBACK WORKSHEET

Feedback is an important part of how people learn. But in professional situations, many people rarely either give or receive feedback. That's a missed opportunity.

Take a moment to reflect: When and from whom do you receive feedback that is useful to you and helps you improve your effectiveness? To whom do you provide useful feedback? How might you do more of this?

I get useful feedback from

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I give useful feedback to

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I could also get feedback from

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I could give feedback to

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What conditions would have to be in place for you to expand the amount of feedback you both get and give?

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