

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

1. It is *descriptive* rather than evaluative. By describing one's own reactions, it leaves the individual free to use it or not to use it as he sees fit. By avoiding evaluative language, it reduces the need for the individual to respond defensively.
2. It is *specific* rather than general. To be told that one is "dominating" will probably not be as useful as to be told that "in the conversation that just took place, you did not appear to be listening to what others were saying, and I felt forced to accept your arguments."
3. It is focused on *behavior* rather than on the person. It is important that we refer to what a person does rather than to what we think or imagine he is. Thus we might say that a person "talked more than anyone else in this meeting" rather than that he is a "loud-mouth." The former allows for the possibility of change; the latter implies a fixed personality trait.
4. It takes into account the *needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback*. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only our own needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. It should be given to help, not to hurt. We too often give feedback because it makes us feel better or gives us a psychological advantage.
5. It is directed toward *behavior which the receiver can do something about*. Frustration is only increased when a person is reminded of some shortcoming over which he has no control.
6. It is *solicited* rather than imposed. Feedback is most useful when the receiver himself has formulated the kind of question which those observing him can answer or when he actively seeks feedback.
7. It is *well-timed*. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior (depending, of course, on the person's readiness to hear it, support available from others, and so forth). The reception and use of feedback involves many possible emotional reactions. Excellent feedback presented at an inappropriate time may do more harm than good.
8. It involves *sharing of information*, rather than giving advice. By sharing information, we leave a person free to decide for himself, in accordance with his own goals and needs. When we give advice we tell him what to do, and to some degree take away his freedom to decide for himself.
9. It involves the *amount of information the receiver can use* rather than the amount we would like to give. To overload a person with feedback is to reduce the possibility that he may be able to use what he receives effectively. When we give more than can be used, we are more often than not satisfying some need of our own rather than helping the other person.
10. It concerns *what is said and done*, or how, not why. The "why" takes us from the observable to the inferred and involves assumptions regarding motive or intent. Telling a person what his motivations or intentions are more often than not tends to alienate the person and contributes to a climate of resentment, suspicion, and distrust; it does not contribute to learning or development. It is dangerous to assume that we know why a person says or does something, or what he "really" means, or what he is "really" trying to accomplish. If we are uncertain of his motives or intent, this uncertainty itself is feedback, however, and should be revealed.
11. It is *checked to insure clear communication*. One way of doing this is to have the receiver

try to rephrase the feedback he has received to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind. No matter what the intent, feedback is often threatening and thus subject to considerable distortion or misinterpretation.

12. It is *checked to determine degree of agreement from others*. When feedback is given in the presence of other people, both giver and receiver have an opportunity to check with others in the group about the accuracy of the feedback. Is this one person's impression or an impression shared by others. Such "consensual validation" is of value to both sender and receiver.
13. It is followed by *attention to the consequences of the feedback*. The person who is giving feedback may greatly improve his helping skills by becoming acutely aware of the effects of his feedback. He can also be of continuing help to the recipient of the feedback.
14. It is an important step toward *authenticity*. Constructive feedback opens the way to a relationship which is built on trust, honesty, and genuine concern. Through such a relationship, we will have achieved one of the most rewarding experiences that man can achieve and will have opened a very important door to personal learning and growth.

Bergquist, William and Steven R. Phillips (Gary H. Quehl General Ed.). 1975.
A HANDBOOK FOR FACULTY DEVELOPMENT. Published by the Council for the
Advancement of Small Colleges, WA. D.C., Dansville Press, Inc., New York.