**HOW TO MASTER THE ART OF GIVING FEEDBACK**

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**Being great at giving and**[**receiving feedback**](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/receiving-feedback/) **speeds your development, accelerates the development of the people you interact with, and builds trust in all those relationships, making you more influential with others (whether those others are across the C-suite or around the dinner table).  And the first step to improving your feedback practice is to work on**[**receiving it well**](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/receiving-feedback/)**.**

**Feedback as influencing**

In the same way that [the feedback you receive](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/receiving-feedback/) needs to be heard to be effective, the feedback you give also has to be heard to be effective. The difference is that when you are [receiving feedback](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/receiving-feedback/) you control whether the listening happens. When you’re giving feedback, you don’t. While it would be nice if others routinely paid full attention to your pearls of wisdom and judged them solely on the merits of their content, in the real world your ability to make your feedback as influential and motivating as possible significantly impacts whether your feedback is actually listened to.

This is an important distinction because thinking of giving feedback as an act of influencing helps us get that, to be effective, the feedback we give needs to be as easy to hear as possible.

**10 principles of best practice giving feedback**

1. **It’s regular, frequent and ongoing:**Do it all the time, with everybody, about everything;
2. **It’s sincere and honest:** your reputation depends on you being straight with people;
3. **It includes an example:** citing a specific behaviour that you observed allows the receiver to place your feedback in context, making it more understandable and therefore more likely to be acted upon;
4. **It describes the benefits or consequences of the behaviour:**hearing the impact the behaviour had gets the receiver to understand why you’re giving them this feedback, so it makes sense;
5. **It’s timely:** make sure to share your feedback as close to the event as practical;
6. **It’s owned:** make sure it’s clear your feedback is from you. Steer clear of, ‘the organisation wants you to know’;
7. **It’s concise:** there’s frequently an inverse relationship between number of words used and impact. Be impactful.

The above seven principles apply to all feedback. The last three apply to developmental feedback specifically.

1. **It’s future oriented:** make sure to articulate what you want to see going forward rather than what you did not see in the past. Notice the difference between, “Your presentation last week was so long winded. You really lost the audience when you got into the statistics” and “For your next presentation, it would be great to see you focus on the strategy, rather than the detailed statistics to keep the attention of the audience right until the end”;
2. **It’s not judgemental:** make sure to describe the behaviour you observed rather than the person. Notice the difference between: “I was surprised you didn’t take the trash out today, like we had agreed” and “Look at the trash. You are so lazy”;
3. **It is shared in private:** make sure to avoid damaging either the recipient’s self-image and/or the strength of your relationship with them. Make sure to conduct development conversations in private.

**The Performance Management Model**

A useful way to think about identifying which feedback would be most helpful in which situation is to use the Performance Management Model:

<https://social.hays.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/giving-feedback-table.png>

Using this model, feedback can be segmented into three broad categories that correspond with three levels of performance: excellent, acceptable and unacceptable.

**1. Recognition feedback**

Recognition feedback is your most important motivational tool. You give recognition feedback when you want people to continue their excellent behaviour. Genuinely and authentically catching people doing things right is your single biggest tool for:

* Promoting excellence, for both the receiver and others who hear about it;
* Improving motivation and morale, for both the receiver and others who hear about it;
* Developing your relationships and increasing trust, which builds your ability to influence.

We don’t know if there actually is a silver bullet for leadership, but if there is it’s catching people doing things right and genuinely and authentically recognising them for their excellent performance. Our biggest feedback giving tip for you is to become excellent at noticing excellence!

**2. Improvement feedback**

Improvement feedback is your most important development tool. You give improvement feedback to acceptable behaviour in order to improve future performance. The critical distinction here is that improvement feedback improves *acceptable* behaviour. Acceptable means there are good things and less good things in the performance. To have your improvement feedback be as motivating as possible, make sure to share both what was most effective about the performance as well as what could be improved going forward.

**3. Confronting**

Confronting is your most important expectation setting tool. You confront to stop the unacceptable behaviour and reset expectations about what future acceptable performance looks like. The past is in the past. Keep clear that the purpose of a confronting conversation is not to extract an apology but to ensure everyone’s on the same page about what the minimum acceptable standard looks like going forward.

An important distinction about confronting is that the more you put off engaging in any needed confronting conversation, the more likely it is you’ll find yourself faced with other situations where you also need to confront. Getting a reputation as someone who engages, respectfully, in necessary confronting conversations to reset expectations significantly reduces the number of such situations that you’ll have to engage in in the future.

Just a quick note, the words ‘performance’ and ‘behaviour’ can be used interchangeably here. Performance is the term normally used in a work context, where behaviour is more often used at home.

**The importance of agreeing expectations**

As we hope you can see, in order to provide the correct kind of feedback in any given situation, it’s really important to agree clear expectations beforehand.

Within the first hour in our workshops, we make sure to agree a workshop charter. How are we agreeing to be with each other while we’re together? We do this whether it’s a 7-day program across six months, or a single day’s interaction.  We agree what we can and can’t do and what we will and won’t do, reducing the likelihood of misperception and dissatisfaction. Not doing this, in our workshops or in any relationship or task, significantly increases the possibility of mismatched expectations and unstated assumptions. Both of which create motivation challenges.

If you’re my boss and you think I’m performing unacceptably while I think I’m performing acceptably, you’ll confront me. But I’m expecting improvement feedback. This can cause significant demotivation, especially if it persists across time.

The bottom line is that agreeing expectations reduces miscommunication and misunderstanding. Making sure to get into the habit of starting every important interaction with some expectation eliciting question is a terrific investment.

**Balancing recognition feedback and improvement feedback**

Sometimes participants come to our workshops with some ‘best practice’ ratio of recognition feedback to improvement feedback they think they should adhere to. On occasion this can lead to some combination of:

* Withholding improvement feedback because they haven’t met their quota of recognition feedback;
* Giving recognition feedback for acceptable performance;
* Making quota by making up recognition feedback, or giving it for immaterial things, “I am impressed by your choice of shoes today because…’.

All of these behaviours are counterproductive. Giving recognition feedback for acceptable work confuses the receiver and increases the likelihood you’ll continue to get only acceptable performance going forward. Giving recognition feedback inauthentically damages the other person’s trust in your feedback or you, or both.  Withholding valuable improvement feedback slows the other person’s development and performance.

Give the appropriate feedback at the appropriate time based on your observations. If you’re giving too much improvement feedback, focus on getting better at noticing excellence. If you’re not giving enough improvement feedback, focus on getting better at noticing how things could be improved.

It’s fine, and valuable, to think about a ‘best practice’ ratio of recognition to improvement feedback but think about it in the context to the *lifetime* of your relationship with that person, not each individual interaction.

**Feedback and relationship life stage**

Thinking about where you are in the life stage of the relationship can also be helpful in terms of what to focus on. At the beginning of a relationship, when it’s less established, having a bias towards genuine recognition feedback can be beneficial as a way to accelerate the strengthening of the connection. Once the relationship is robust, with trust established, having a bias towards genuine improvement feedback will speed development and strengthen the relationship further because the receiver gets your commitment to their success.

Hopefully you’ve got by now though, the most important thing with feedback is to do it consistently and frequently – all the time, with everybody, about everything.

Feedback is a big deal, whether in the C-suite or around the dinner table. Being great at giving and [receiving feedback](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/receiving-feedback/) accelerates your development, accelerates the development of the important people in your life, and builds trust, making you more influential in all those important relationships.

**Want to get better at receiving feedback? Read our next**[**blog.**](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/receiving-feedback/)

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[**Giving**](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/giving-feedback/)**and receiving feedback can feel uncomfortable, and unfortunately, it’s something people often try to avoid. But feedback is a big deal. Getting better at it will:**

1. Provide you with an accurate picture of your real-life strengths and weaknesses, so you can better leverage those strengths and improve those development areas;
2. Give other people the opportunity to leverage their strengths and improve their development areas;
3. Reduce miscommunication and enable more honest, forthright conversations, both of which build relationship quality and trust.

Getting better at [giving](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/giving-feedback/) and receiving feedback will speed your development, accelerate the development of the people you interact with, and build trust in all your relationships (from the C-suite to around the dinner table), making you more influential.

**Feedback is not a performance review**

Let’s be clear, the feedback we’re talking about here is the informal sharing that happens daily. What this blog *isn’t* about is the periodic, organisational performance review. An annual performance review must never be a substitute for these daily, informal feedback interactions.

The two have separate functions – a performance review exists to satisfy an organisational system need, whilst daily feedback supports ongoing individual development (including yours). Nothing should ever be raised in an organisational performance review that hasn’t been discussed, ideally multiple times, in daily, informal feedback conversations. There should never be any surprises in a formal performance review.

[**Giving**](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/giving-feedback/)**and receiving feedback**

It’s also important to remember there are two separate elements to an effective feedback process: [giving it well](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/giving-feedback/) and receiving it well. Occasionally, a few of our client executives thought that meant “Exactly. I give you feedback and you receive my feedback…”. That’s not what we mean! To be clear, these blogs are absolutely about improving your ability to give feedback well but, at least as importantly, they’re also about improving your ability to hear other people’s feedback well.

This is vitally important because, possibly somewhat counter-intuitively, the single biggest thing you can do to have your feedback be more influential, is to consistently listen to the feedback you are given.

Mastering feedback starts with listening well.

**Active listening**

But not all listening is created equal. Active listening is the purest and most influential form of listening. Done correctly, active listening:

* Requires you to pay attention, to focus on what you’re hearing, preventing you from tuning out and thinking about your response;
* Provides a sense check for the speaker – they get to confirm that what they’re saying is what they’re meaning to say;
* Closes the loop, by having the speaker understand what you’ve taken away from their communication.

Active listening provides the added benefit of demonstrating your commitment to your shared relationship, because your action of focusing totally on their communication clearly indicates the importance you attach to what they have to say.

So, what is active listening?  It’s demonstrating that you’re hearing, without judgement, what you’re being told.

How do you do it? You summarise the key message(s) you’ve heard and reflect it or them back to the speaker as concisely as possible, along with any emotional intensity if present.

Let’s break that down:

* **Identify the key concepts heard** – what was their most important message?
* **Identify any emotion present** – do they have any feelings about this message? If so, what are they?
* **Summarise as concisely as possible** – what’s the fewest words you can use to summarise that most important message and that emotion, if present?
* **Reflect back to the speaker** – share your concise content (and emotion) summary with the speaker

**Receiving feedback**

Not surprisingly, active listening is the key component of receiving feedback well.

Here’s a five-step model for receiving feedback:

1. Active listening (micro)
2. Active listening (macro)
3. Thank/recognise the giver
4. Ask to probe
5. Probe to understand

**1. Active Listening (micro)**

As soon as you clue in that you’re about to receive some feedback, the key step to be effective in the interaction is to commit to active listening. This has two vital benefits:

1. Immersing yourself in practicing this important skill engages your analytical brain to need to deconstruct their communication, creating a distance from your emotional brain that may otherwise want to jump in and defend itself;
2. You’re so busy engaging with what you’re hearing (“What’s the key message I’m hearing? Is there any emotion here? How am I going to summarise this?”) you don’t have time to think about a (possibly ill-judged) response.

Micro-active listening is taking each individual piece of what they say and summarising it. After your first summary, they may well add to, correct or clarify their communication. You then summarise that next communication, and the next and the next until they finish.

**2. Active Listening (macro)**

Once they’ve finished, the second step is active listening again, but this time providing your summary of the entirety of the interaction. What’s your summary of the totality of their message and any emotion?

**3. Thank/recognise the giver**

It is vitally important that you then thank the giver for the feedback that they have shared, irrespective of the content of the feedback or whether you agree with it or not.

It’s by building your reputation as someone genuinely interested in hearing feedback that you create an environment where you continue to be given the constructive feedback vital for your future development. If you do not thank them, they are unlikely to try again, which will cut off your access to this invaluable information.

If the feedback was clear, specific and understandable, thanking them is the end of the process. If the feedback giver shared something you believe to be incorrect or do not agree with, now is *not* the time to point that out. Do that in a later interaction or, much better yet, *show* them they are mistaken by your subsequent actions, don’t tell them.

**4. Ask to probe**

It is also possible, however, that the feedback you received was less than totally clear or specific and, as a result, you are unclear what they think you should do to be more effective in the future. If this is the case, after you have genuinely thanked the person for their feedback, you can ask, “Would you be okay if I asked you a question or two about your feedback?”

If you get the answer “No” to this question, this is very clear feedback that you have not done steps 1-3 as effectively as you need to, in which case, loop back to step 1 and start again.

**5. Probe to understand**

Once they say, “Yes”, you can then ask whatever questions you need to turn their lower quality feedback into high quality feedback. Potential questions might include some or all of: “When you said I was not being supportive of you, what, specifically, did I do, or not do, that caused you to feel that?” “When was that?” “What would you prefer I do in that situation?”

**Developing a receiving feedback mindset**

It’s one thing to have an understanding of best practice receiving feedback, it’s quite another to pluck up the courage to actually engage in these behaviours in real life. So, this section is all about getting you to actually take your courage in your hands and reap the enormous benefits of developing yourself faster, developing others faster, and building stronger relationships.

Let’s be clear, accessing a broad range of others’ perspectives is the only effective way to understand our true strengths and development areas in the real world, instead of our more-often-than-not mistaken beliefs about how we think we are experienced by others.  We understand that this is uncomfortable territory for most people, especially bosses. So here are three realities to encourage you to embrace the practice of feedback from others.

**1. All feedback is perception**

Any individual piece of feedback says more about the giver than the receiver. We are all prey to the filters and biases that exist in our minds. As a result, any single piece of feedback you receive is clouded more by the giver’s filters than by what you actually did. All feedback is perception.

Hopefully, this will help you hear feedback, however critical, as ‘this person’s perception of a specific behaviour’. Developing this perspective allows you to stay in that judgement-free mindset when you hear something that you believe is unfair or inaccurate. It is all just perception.

Because one piece of feedback is more indicative of the giver’s filters than your behaviour, it is vitally important that you solicit feedback from multiple, varied sources. With feedback from multiple sources, you can then triangulate to evaluate what are the common themes that you are hearing from multiple perspectives that may warrant action.

**2. People think what they think already**

In our workshops, Mike will ask, “Think of an impression you have of me”.  After a few seconds comes the follow up, “Now think of a positive impression you have of me”. The laughter, or absence of it, can be a useful feedback data point about how the workshop’s progressing! Then comes the important question, “Irrespective of the thought you had, was it me asking the question that prompted you to come up with that impression for the first time, or was that impression already there and asking the question merely brought it back to the top of your mind?” We get everyone to choose which category they are in and then ask for a show of hands.

Routinely, more than 90% of participants say they had their impression already. Avoiding feedback does not mean that perceptions are not there; it just means that you don’t get to hear what people think of you. People have their opinions about you already, soliciting their feedback merely gives you the chance to hear what they think, so you can choose whether you want to do something about it or not. Your job in receiving feedback is to hear and accept that the other person has a particular opinion. Accepting that they have an opinion is quite different from agreeing with that opinion. Your job is to hear and accept their opinion, without judgement. You don’t have to agree with them.

**3. You don’t always have to act on feedback**

An additional misunderstanding about feedback is that if you listen to it, you are required to act on it. This is not true, especially since any single piece of feedback says more about the giver than the receiver. What is most important to people is being heard, not what you choose to do subsequently. You build your relationship with someone when they feel heard, which is achieved by you listening, without judgement. What actions you take as a result is up to you. We would recommend, however, that you reinforce the value you place on their feedback by circling back around and letting them know what you ultimately did or did not do (and why). What is most important, though, is the hearing, not your subsequent actions.

**Asking for feedback**

But how can you get better at receiving feedback when you work somewhere where the culture of sharing is ‘not how we do things around here’? You ask for it. Some ways of asking, however, are better than others. The best way to start the process is to ask a direct, but bounded question.

If you are asking for development feedback specifically, we would recommend, “What’s one thing you would like to see me do more of, less of, or differently?” If you are looking for both, try, “What is one thing I do that works well, and what is one thing you would like to see me do more of, less of, or differently?” If you get a mumble, or an “everything’s okay” response, follow up with, “I get that. And so that I can keep getting better, what’s one thing I could do more of, less of, or differently?” Of critical importance, clearly, is that you absolutely follow the best practice receiving feedback process when they then share their observation.

Once you’ve created the habit, you can then start asking for two or three or four items of feedback.

As we said in the intro, [giving](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/giving-feedback/) and receiving feedback has huge benefits, both for yourself and for those around you. In our [second blog](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/giving-feedback/) in the series, we’ll run through our best practice tips for being as influential as you can be with the feedback you provide others.

**Want to get better at giving feedback? Read our next**[**blog.**](https://social.hays.com/2019/02/04/giving-feedback/)

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