

Giving And Receiving Feedback

Background

The usual, unspoken setup for an observer giving feedback to a caller is something like the following:

- The caller is expected to give a flawless performance.
- The observer wants to make the caller's performance better suit the observer's taste.
- The observer therefore notes any imperfections or shortcomings, and brings them to the attention of the caller.
- If the caller had reasons for doing what he did, or is feeling vulnerable,¹ the caller may defend himself.
- The observer may disagree or not feel completely heard, in which case the process repeats.
- If the caller complains about the feedback, the observer takes that as defensiveness on the part of the caller.

The caller can't win this game, and so is likely to view the feedback as a weapon wielded against him, rather than a tool offered for his use. He will probably brush it off ("she doesn't know what she's talking about") or beat himself up with it ("I'm just no good at this"). In neither case is the caller likely to look into the feedback for what changes to make.

Conversely, the observer can't lose, and therefore has little incentive to make the feedback useful; and there is no process to improve the quality of the feedback.

About these notes

We try to reduce the caller's defensive feelings (so the feedback can sink in) and improve the usefulness of the observer's feedback (so the caller can learn from it). We can't control the actual setup and assumptions, but we can constrain the caller and observer to act as if the setup were this:

- The caller has asked the observer to note (certain aspects of) the performance.
- The caller is the one who will decide what changes (if any) are desired.
- The observer's job is to provide information to help the caller make those decisions.

We will also constrain the sorts of thing each person is allowed to say. Again, in doing this we have two goals:

- Give the caller no reason to feel defensive, so the feedback can sink in.
- Tune the feedback for maximum value in helping the caller decide what changes to make, if any. (This is less important than avoiding defensive feelings. If the feedback doesn't sink in, it doesn't matter how useful it is.)

Here is the model:

The Observer's Role

We try to eliminate reasons for the caller to feel defensive by constraining what you say. As best you can, make your feedback...

¹ And what caller isn't feeling vulnerable?

An observation about your direct experience. Don't say, "that was good," "you should have made one more set," or "everyone got confused in the B part." Do say, "I found your directions for the figure-8 quite clear," "we were crowded at the bottom," or "the hey in the B part sometimes broke down in my set."

Specific. Don't say, "that was good," or "your directions didn't work." Do say, "you got us moving after only eight syllables," or "I was facing down when you said, 'turn right,' but some other second men were facing up."

Balanced. List things you think need changing, things you think are great, and things that are just interesting ("you did 2 more dances tonight than last week").

Useful. Don't say, "you're too short," or "I was feeling grumpy tonight." Do say, "I couldn't see you from the back," or "I needed a water break about 15 minutes before we took one."

Some tendencies the observer may need to fight

Repeating the feedback until you get the reaction you want. That is self-serving. Give the feedback, don't wish for anything in return, and hand the initiative back to the caller.

Noticing only things that need "fixing" or only things you know how to "fix." You are not the one who will choose what to change and what to keep, and you are not the one who will be making the changes. Give as much information as you can, as specifically as you can observe and remember.

Solving the "problem" for the caller. Let them decide whether it's a problem, and whether it's worth solving. Even if it is, give the caller credit for being able to solve it. Help if they ask, but only then.

Telling only what they want to hear. It's more useful to give all the information (or, if time is tight, a balanced selection).

Softening the feedback: "since the fan was going, your voice seemed a little soft, though I know you can project when you want to, and ..." Ultimately, that's patronizing, and not as useful as "I could barely hear you." Keep it crisp.

Euphemisms and hints, like "Bruce, it's 9 o'clock!" These are invitations for miscommunication. Be as direct and explicit as you can.

The Caller's Role

You are in charge of the feedback. You get to say what kind of feedback you want, and on what subjects. You can say you don't want any feedback. You can ask your friends to notice details of what you do, or to notice their general feelings about your presentation. You can tell them you're working on, say, your timing, and to ignore other things. You can say, "stop — I've got all I can handle right now."

Ask clarifying questions if possible. Be sure you understand the feedback. "What effect did it have on you when I did that?" "Can you be more specific?" "Where were you in the room when that happened?" Note that you aren't agreeing or disagreeing; you are just asking about their experience.

Don't say anything else. Don't explain, don't defend, don't even comment. You will be strongly tempted, but don't: if you are mentally forming your response, you aren't hearing the feedback.

At the end, give the observer a sincere “Thank you.” You have been given a gift, and whether or not you think it’s valuable, the observer has spent time and effort noticing, remembering and choosing the words. And they are trying to improve the scene. Think of that when you say the words...

... and stop there. Change the subject, talk to someone else, or walk away. You have both worked to make the discussion a one-way transfer of information. Keep it that way.

Additional Notes

Earlier we said to report only what you directly observe. This cuts out what you think, what you conclude, etc. However, you *are* allowed to describe your mental and physical state. Since you are the world’s authority on those things, telling the caller about them does not tend to give rise to defensive feelings. If someone says, “my feet hurt,” your first response isn’t “no they don’t!” so reports of your own mental/physical state are admissible. They have value in things like “I was really energized by the sound of your voice.”

A caution about what are called ‘I’ messages, like “I notice that the dishes haven’t been washed.” This is often proposed as a formula for softening criticism or directing it at the behavior rather than the person. But it’s only partially effective and it lets you avoid the hard work. The problem is “I observed that ...” can prefix any declarative sentence, including very judgmental ones, like “I noticed that you suck.” On the other hand, statements about your own mental or physical state are incontrovertible, so things like “my attention wandered” don’t cause defensive feelings, and so the feedback model allows them.

Callers: as mentioned before, the model encourages you to ask clarifying questions, to be sure you understand what the observer is reporting. They have even more benefits.

- When you ask for more detail, you reinforce the idea that the observer is working for you, rather than the other way around. That helps reduce your vulnerable feelings.
- You also encourage the observer to notice and remember more detail next time and report it more specifically. In the long run you train your friends to give you better feedback, and to see their role as working for you.
- When you ask for more detail, or even just clarification, you are being a good listener. This is very rewarding, and encourages people to bring you their observations.
- Often the disruptive dancer is just trying to help and thinks no one is listening. When you listen to them well they often calm down, and sometimes turn into assets to the scene.

Remember, both the observer and caller halves of this model are skills, and take practice. Expect the conversations to feel awkward at first, and to get better slowly and with reversals. The benefits are worth the trouble. They’re also many-layered, and this is just the first layer. If you’re interested in more, talk with me in person.

Bruce Hamilton, 2016