

Giving Feedback That Results In Change

George is a new employee in a large corporate firm. He is attending a week long induction program. On the first day, George is 20 minutes late. The induction trainer, Sue, feels he must be mortified by this blunder, even though he doesn't offer an apology or an explanation for his tardiness. The trainer is giving George the benefit of the doubt. Her sympathy diminishes the next day when George is late again. George doesn't seem fazed by this and casually blames his lateness on the proximity of his house to the office. Sue takes him aside and they discuss the importance of being on time for scheduled meetings such as training sessions. She believes it was a good conversation and that she had gained agreement from George as to the importance of punctuality. But to her surprise, the next day, George is 30 minutes late.

Whether you are a people manager, a partner, parent or peer, there are times when we will need to give feedback and times when we will need to receive feedback. Giving feedback can feel like a perilous task and receiving feedback can feel like a threat. Even with the most noble intentions, feedback can cause more harm than good to the situation and the relationship. And as we can see with George and Sue, sometimes feedback completely misses the mark. The key to delivering constructive and valuable feedback is in understanding how to deliver it clearly and with meaning for both parties.

The purpose of giving feedback will generally be to illicit a change in behaviour. In the case of George and Sue, Sue wanted George to be on time. To Sue, that showed respect for her and the other participants. It also meant the meetings ran smoothly and she wasn't required to repeat anything. But what did punctuality mean to George? Did Sue find out?

Meaning is derived from what you most value. George may not have valued punctuality for a number of reasons. Perhaps he hadn't associated it with disrespect. Perhaps he didn't realise how detrimental it was to his professional image. Sue and George need to find a goal that is valued by both of them. If the person being asked to change their behaviour is doing it solely to nurture someone else's values, the best you can hope for is a short term result.

From our April article, *The Impact of Brain Bias*, you would remember that

amplifying negative feedback is an instinctive response. When we receive feedback, this instinct can activate our fight or flight response and acute stress response. This defensive reaction can affect our ability to think clearly and rationally, inhibiting our capacity to act positively on the feedback received.

To avoid this stress response to feedback, and to ensure you are not having the same conversation over and over again, there are a number of techniques you can employ.

1. Ensure the environment is private and non-threatening. Neutral territory is a must. Public criticism will never be well received.
2. Ask questions. Before launching into your advice, find out the other point of view. Remember, you are searching for common ground to facilitate long term change.
3. Give information. Just as you need to find out the other point of view, you also have to clearly share your own perspective. The meaning behind your reaction to the behaviour might be obvious to you, but may not be obvious to others.
4. Think about how you will deliver your message. Maintain objectivity and take the opportunity to express understanding where possible.
5. Concentrate most on what is of value to the recipient, as a good reason to change. That is what will resonate most strongly. Remember, the idea is to initiate change, not to be right.

6. Give yourselves time to process the information and ideas discussed. Allow silence during the conversation for thinking time, and ensure one of you does not have to rush off to another meeting.

7. People can stew on feedback and entertain several thoughts in the hours post feedback. Arrange a time in the near future (24-48 hours later) to check in with each other to debrief, ensure mutual understanding and address any other issues.

8. Change is not easy and often takes time. Ensure you are offering regular positive encouragement and reinforcement to support the goal of long term change.

The most motivating resolutions will come from the receiver themselves. If the receiver can identify their own meaning and the solutions for making the behaviour change possible, they will feel ownership and a sense of empowerment about a goal they want to 'move toward'. A positive result all round! 💡

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e: info@successfulminds.com.au
w: www.successfulminds.com.au