

Characteristics of Constructive Feedback

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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 they see 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 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 what we think or imagine he is. Thus we might say that a person "talked more than anyone else at the meeting" rather than to say that he is a "loud mouth". The former allows for the possibility of a personality change. The latter implies a fixed personality trait.
4. It takes into account the **needs of both the receiver and the 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 has formulated the kind of question which those observing can answer.
7. It is **well-timed**. In general, feedback is most useful at the earliest opportunity after the given behavior. The reception and use of feedback involves many possible emotional reactions. Excellent feedback presented at the 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 them what to do, and to some degree take away their freedom to decide for themselves.

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. If we are uncertain of motives or intent, this uncertainty is itself 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 to see if it corresponds to what the sender had in mind. No matter what the intent, feedback is often threatening and subject to considerable distortion or misinterpretation.
12. It is ***checked to determine degree of agreement from others***. Is this one person’s impression or an impression shared by others?
13. It is followed by ***attention to the consequences of the feedback***. The person who is giving the feedback can greatly improve by becoming aware of the effects of the feedback.
14. It is an important step toward ***authenticity***. Constructive feedback opens the way to a relationship that is built on trust, honesty, and genuine concern.

Examples of Constructive Feedback:

Your use of humor, as when you told the “see me after class” joke to illustrate the importance of context, created a relaxed atmosphere.

Students participated eagerly. In fact, fifteen hands shot up when you asked for a definition of “marginal costing.”

Your contrast between a schizophrenic and a manic-depressive, using the two case histories, helped students appreciate the complexity of mental health disorders.

Your quotation by Roscoe Pound emphasized the importance of law professors involving themselves in public life.

Your discussion of field work methods versus survey research seemed unfocused until you provided the three concrete illustrations.

Students took copious notes during your lecture on the different types of computer systems for database management. They also frequently consulted your handout on using a database management package.

Your summary of the inventions of Ransom E. Olds and Henry Ford provided a strong conclusion to the lecture on the automobile industry.

When the student asked you to explain the controversy over categorization of emergency departments by level of service, you responded promptly and concretely.

You became particularly animated when you shifted the discussion to an overview of single cell reproduction.

Students shook their heads, indicating confusion, when you mentioned the Oklahoma Supreme Court’s decision to uphold utility rate increase enacted by the city in 1971, but your clarification of the case during questioning seemed to resolve any difficulties.

Your use of Roosevelt to illustrate the strong-presidency concept helped students grasp the abstraction. Several of them nodded appreciably after this example.

Students seemed to benefit from the peer review session you held with their comparison-contrast rough drafts. They frequently consulted your guidelines as they reviewed each other’s papers. I overheard comments such as, “Hey, thanks I never thought of that,” and “Thanks for those two concrete examples.”

I noticed from several nearby notebooks that your outline on the board of Grover Cleveland’s goals (to cleanse politics, to reduce tariffs, to aid consumers and attack privilege, and to introduce the civil service) enabled students to organize their notes.

Examples of Concrete Suggestions for Improvement:

Your illustration of a Hasse diagram could not be seen clearly from the back of the room. Perhaps you could consider a larger drawing, an overhead projector, or a handout.

Students seemed unusually tense during the drill over the past tense (imperfect). Have you thought about having the entire class repeat a mispronounced word rather than the individual student?

You might focus more on the process of arriving at a solution rather than on the final outcome itself. A response such as "The orbit must be one de Broglie wavelength in circumference" does not encourage higher order thinking.

You seemed a bit uncertain about the material when you shifted into aggression modeling and reverse modeling. Some examples from current TV programs might have added interest and clarity.

Examples of Confusing or Imprecise Feedback:

"Excellent insistence on terminology and exactness of definitional terms"

Problems: Even though this comment is intended as a compliment, it doesn't describe what is actually occurring in the classroom. Is the lecturer pinning students down, insisting that they recite definitions from the textbook; does the instructor pause during his/her lectures to define key terms?

"The presentation lacked cohesiveness and did not relate significance and utilization in the management of a business. In addition...the assignments should have included application as a corollary to reading."

Problems: Too many vague words make this virtually incomprehensible. Was the "presentation" a lecture, discussion, or something else? Do words such as "utilization" and "application" refer to specific examples, case histories or something else?