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Give It To Me Straight (Effective Feedback)



As an executive coach and an experiential educator, every day I collaborate with or observe people giving and receiving feedback. In a number of settings I work with groups whose purpose is improving members' leadership and interpersonal skills, and the primary tool we use is feedback. And a common trait shared by almost every one of the hundreds of people I've worked with over the last eight years is a desire to hear direct, candid feedback. I literally hear people say "*Give it to me straight*" in almost every group.

But this simple request turns out to be more complicated than it sounds at first. Feedback is one of the most powerful—and one of the fastest—ways to learn how to be more effective in our interactions with others, particularly when it's honest and straightforward. But effective feedback doesn't happen spontaneously; it's critical to learn how to give—and receive—feedback in a way that's effective in a particular context.

What "*Give it to me straight*" actually means in practice will vary widely from one relationship to another, and will change within every relationship over time. And an irony I've observed over thousands of feedback conversations is that when we first say "*Give it to me straight*," we think we're talking about *negative* feedback because we imagine that criticism will be painful to hear, but it turns out that truly heartfelt *positive* feedback can be equally hard to handle. Many people I've worked with are actually *more* uncomfortable receiving direct, candid praise than being criticized.

Giving and receiving feedback effectively are learnable skills, and while the five concepts discussed here may serve as helpful guidelines, it's important to recognize that we can improve our facility with these skills only by actually trying them out. We can—and should—start in low-risk situations, such as an experiential role-play, a coaching engagement or a friendly relationship. But real growth will require us to get out of our comfort zones and to risk making mistakes when the stakes are higher.

1) Feedback and Social Threat

Most of us find the prospect of a feedback conversation daunting at the best of times, even in the context of a friendly relationship. Hearing someone say "*Can I give you some feedback?*" is almost guaranteed to elevate our heart rate and

raise our blood pressure. These are common signs of a threat response, a cascade of neurological and physiological events that occur when we encounter a situation that we perceive as threatening. Neuroscientists have determined that we respond to threatening social situations in the same way that we respond to actual threats to our physical safety and have coined the term “social threat” to describe these experiences. David Rock is an executive coach who’s made an extensive study of recent neuroscience research to understand its implications for organizational life, and he developed the SCARF Model to characterize interpersonal situations that are likely to trigger a social threat.

SCARF stands for status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness (i.e. the extent to which we perceive others as members of our social group) and fairness. Whenever our status, certainty, autonomy or perception of fairness is diminished, we’re more likely to experience a social threat. And an encounter with someone we perceive as unrelated is also more likely to trigger a social threat.

Given these factors, it’s unsurprising that a feedback conversation can be so stressful. Someone presuming to give us feedback is (at least momentarily) occupying a high-status position, and we may feel “demoted” as a result. We don’t know what feedback we’re about to get, so we’re immediately put in a state of uncertainty. Despite our discomfort, we’re likely to feel obligated to listen, so we have less autonomy. These factors are at play in almost every feedback conversation, and if we feel less connected with the other person or if we don’t believe their feedback is fair, then we’re certain to experience the conversation as a social threat.

A threat response predisposes us to act quickly on limited information, and while this classic “fight or flight” behavior is well-adapted to literal threats to our physical safety, it often serves us poorly in interpersonal situations that we perceive as threatening. When we’re in the grip of a threat response, our ability to understand complex information and respond to it thoughtfully is seriously compromised. We seize on what we believe to be the most important data and take action on that basis. While this set of responses surely served us well in our evolutionary environment, it undermines our ability to safely navigate challenging interpersonal situations—such as feedback conversations.

So when we’re preparing to give someone feedback, it’s critical to avoid triggering a social threat. Pay keen attention to the potential for any aspect of the conversation to impact the other person, including such factors as timing, duration, physical location and proximity.

2) Just Enough Emotion

Despite the risk of triggering a social threat inherent in any feedback conversation, one reason interpersonal feedback is such an effective way to learn is because it has the potential to evoke meaningful emotions in the first place. While the strong negative emotions that result from a social threat have the potential to inhibit learning and block communication, emotions play an essential role in our reasoning process. As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio wrote in his influential book, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*,

[H]uman reason depends on several brain systems, working in concert across many levels of neuronal organization, rather than on a single brain center. Both "high-level" and "low-level" brain regions...cooperate in the making of reason. The lower levels in the neural edifice of reason are the same ones that regulate the processing of emotions and feelings. Emotion, feeling and biological regulation all play a role in human reason.
[p xvii]

In addition, emotional experiences resonate more strongly with us and stick more effectively in our memories. As neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux notes, “There is both an upside and a downside to the fact that emotional states make memories stronger. The upside is that we remember our emotional experiences to a greater extent than non-emotional ones. The downside is that we remember our emotional experiences to a greater extent than non-emotional ones.”

So while we have to guard against the risk of triggering a social threat when giving feedback, it’s essential to make effective use of emotion in any feedback conversation, and this means expressing *just enough* emotion ourselves to trigger *sufficient* emotion in the other person *without going too far*. If we express too much emotion, we may trigger a social threat, provoking a hostile or defensive reaction, and ending the dialogue or damaging the relationship. But if

we fail to express enough emotion, we significantly diminish the impact of our feedback, resulting in an ongoing cycle of ineffective conversations.

The right balance of emotion is highly situational and will differ widely not only across interpersonal relationships but also according to the issue under discussion, the timing of the conversation, and many other factors. Our ability to find the balance that's right for any given conversation will depend on our understanding of the other person and our relationship with them as well as on our ability to regulate and express our emotions effectively.

3) Build the Relationship

As noted above, when we feel less connected to another person, an interaction with them is more likely to trigger a social threat. When we need to give feedback to someone who differs from us—not only according to demographic categories, but also as a function of our respective roles—it's important to be able to establish a sense of relatedness with that person to minimize the risk of social threat. And this work is much more effective when it's done over time, across a series of interactions, rather than in a desperate—and transparent—attempt to soften the blow before delivering critical feedback.

John Gottman, a social psychologist who's one of the world's leading researchers on marriage and relationships, notes that the likelihood of a successful conclusion to a difficult conversation is critically dependent on what he calls “the quality of the friendship” in the relationship, and he defines friendship by the existence of seven factors:

1. Feeling known by the other person.
2. A “culture of appreciation” that nurtures mutual fondness, admiration and respect.
3. Sensitivity and responsiveness to even the most minor bids for attention.
4. The degree of mutual influence.
5. Accepting that some problems are intractable and can't be solved right now.
6. An awareness that inside those intractable problems is often a deeply personal dream, and a willingness to share those dreams.
7. The creation of shared meaning.

Gottman's research focuses on married couples and others in committed partnerships, and I'm not suggesting that our working relationships need to rise to that level of intimacy to be successful. But I *am* suggesting that Gottman's guidelines for gauging “the quality of the friendship” apply to any relationship, and that they can direct us in our efforts to connect with others, particularly when we're working across role boundaries and other dimensions of difference.

Finally, Gottman's research also shows that the ratio of positive to negative interactions in a successful relationship over time is 5:1, even during periods of conflict. This ratio doesn't apply to a single conversation, nor does it mean that we're obligated to pay someone five compliments before we can criticize them. But it does emphasize the importance of positive feedback over time as a means of building a successful relationship. (Note that we can run into problems with positive feedback as well.)

4) Play Fair

A certain way to derail a feedback conversation is to trigger a social threat (and a subsequent defensive or hostile reaction) by providing feedback that the other person perceives as unfair or inaccurate. The difficulty is that the concepts of “fair” and “accurate” are inherently subjective. In Chapter 2 of *The Interpersonal Dynamics Reader* [PDF], David Bradford and Mary Ann Huckabay use the metaphor of “the net” to explain this dynamic:

Most of us act like amateur psychologists in that we try to figure out why others act as they do. If you interrupt me (a behavior) and I feel annoyed (the effect on me), I try and understand why you would do that. So I make an attribution of your motives (it must be that you are inconsiderate)...

As common as this attribution process is, it also can be dysfunctional. Note that my sense-making is a guess. That is my hunch as to why you act the way you do. I am “**crossing over the net**” from what is my area of expertise (that I am annoyed at your behavior), to your area of expertise (your motives and intentions). My imputation of your motives can always be debated, (“*You don't listen.*” “*Yes, I do.*” “*No you don't.*”) whereas sticking with my own feelings and reactions is never debatable. (“*I felt irritated by your interruption just now.*” “*You shouldn't feel that way because I didn't mean to interrupt you.*” “*Perhaps not, but I feel irritated nonetheless.*”) [pp 4-5, emphasis added]

As Bradford and Huckabay make clear, by “crossing the net” and guessing at the other person’s motives and intentions, we succeed in creating a plausible explanation that helps us understand their behavior, but we run the risk of being wrong. Even if we guess right in most circumstances—and we typically do—the challenge in the context of a feedback conversation is that the cost of being wrong is triggering a social threat in the other person and derailing the conversation.

The solution identified by Bradford and Huckabay is to “stay on our side of the net” and stick with what we know for certain—our response to the observed behavior—and avoid making any guesses about the other person’s motives and intentions. This minimizes the risk that our feedback will be perceived as unfair or inaccurate.

5) Give It To Me Straight?

While an increased emphasis on interpersonal feedback in many groups and organizations can provide us with more opportunities to test and improve our abilities to give and receive feedback effectively, it can also have some unintended consequences. A “feedback-rich” culture can be one in which people feel compelled to participate in feedback conversations even when they’re not truly prepared to do so. Feedback givers can feel an unjustified sense of authority and objectivity, failing to realize that feedback says as much about the giver (what we notice, what we comment upon, how we say it) as it does about the recipient. Feedback recipients can feel obligated to change in response to critical feedback, even when it conflicts with their better judgment.

So while I’m a confirmed believer in the benefits of feedback, I also encourage people to stop and think carefully when stepping into a feedback conversation, particularly before responding to a request to “*Give it to me straight.*” While it’s important to provide honest and direct feedback in response to such a request, it’s also important to consider the overall context—including the surrounding group or organizational culture—in order to meet such a request effectively.

Update/Postscript: I'm reminded of [my recent comment to Whitney Johnson](#): "*At the heart of every piece of critical feedback is a dream of a better way to interact with each other.*" This helps explain my emphasis on the emotional aspects of feedback conversations--when we're unhappy or upset with someone and want them to change, the purpose of any critical feedback we might deliver is to turn that "dream of a better way of interacting" into reality. But if we simply "give it to them straight" and fail to effectively manage the emotions evoked by the conversation--either by repressing them or by venting them full-force--we're much less likely to achieve that goal.

Thanks to Carole Robin, David Bradford, Mary Ann Huckabay and Scott Bristol for introducing me to many of these concepts and for the opportunity to explore them further while working with them at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

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