

Offering and Receiving Feedback

Guide



Prepared by: Root Cuthbertson 2021. Text adapted from Deborah Benham 2019, Claire Milne 2016, Seeds for Change 2009.

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Many people struggle with feedback. They may have learned that it can be messy, counterproductive, or harmful rather than helpful. This guide aims to help individuals to more skillfully offer feedback, and make the most of any feedback they receive.

What is Feedback?

Feedback is natural. It is a common aspect of resilience in individual organisms, groups, and ecosystems. It is a form of communication aiming to convey information that will ideally lead to desirable outcomes or changes in behaviour.

In groups, it is common for individuals to feel tension, friction, or conflict with each other. A transition in group culture can involve learning to communicate about these using both constructive feedback and Clearings (see [Transition in Group Culture](#), see [Clearing Procedure](#)). A Clearing can address important topics that may take some time to discuss. Smaller topics that can be discussed more quickly can be addressed by constructive feedback. Ideally, individuals can transition toward receiving feedback well, learning from it, and making adjustments.

In collaborative groups, feedback should be neutral, and expressed with the best interests of the individual or the group in mind. Feedback is seldom accompanied by an emotional 'charge' – a feeling of holding an unpleasant or uncomfortable emotion (upset, anger, discomfort, confusion), as a result of an interaction or incident with another person. Ideally a 'charge' develops infrequently, only in relation to important topics.

For those times when it is not enough to simply offer feedback, a Clearing can provide a pathway to remove a 'charge,' untangle misunderstandings, and increase empathy, allowing people to feel better about their relationship (see [Clearing Procedure](#)). Feedback and Clearings can both be elements of a group developing a 'feedback culture,' which prioritises both individual well-being and relationships with others (see [Feedback Culture](#)).



Why might someone avoid feedback?

There are many reasons why someone might avoid either offering or receiving feedback. Typically, these are based on a personal history where feedback was not encouraged, resulting in beliefs like:

- People, in general, do not benefit from or need feedback, so neither does any specific individual.
- There will be bad consequences for offering or receiving feedback.
- Relationships which include feedback are somehow wrong.
- Offering or receiving feedback, like earning money, involves a transaction.
- Feedback, like any form of self-care which hopes to mitigate discomfort or change undesirable behaviour, is either wrong or best kept to a minimum.

Ideally, groups can transition toward a culture where it feels better to offer and receive feedback than not to. Because this can involve disrupting behaviour habits or patterns, it can feel uncomfortable at first. Try allowing those who may be unused to offering or receiving feedback some time to practice -- not getting it quite right and trying again. During this time, a bit of patience, kindness, and compassion often help (see [Feedback Culture](#); see [Sharing and Celebrating Failings](#)).

Types of Feedback (there are at least 3 types)

Appreciative feedback

Appreciative feedback recognises and appreciates specific behaviour. It can be offered when someone does something specifically helpful, or differently from how someone else does. People may have different beliefs about offering appreciative feedback based on their cultural background. Some people may find it difficult to receive praise in certain contexts. Others may mistrust appreciative feedback and feel it is inauthentic. Structured or formal appreciative feedback can feel contrived or uncomfortable. Authentic or informal appreciative feedback can feel easier to receive (see [Offering Appreciation and Gratitude](#)).

For example: "I appreciate the way you did that. It was very helpful for me and for the group."

Unconstructive feedback

Unconstructive feedback, including negative criticism and personal attack, is disrespectful, polarising, judgmental, undermining, blaming and shaming. In addition, it is non-specific, vague, or general. "You always do this," or "You never do that." It's not kind, compassionate, helpful, or easy to receive. Unconstructive feedback typically increases friction or tension, leading to defensiveness, escalation, or counter-attack. It seldom leads to desirable outcomes.



Constructive Feedback

Constructive feedback is respectful, helpful, supportive, and specific. It specifically identifies a particular behaviour or incident that happened, and names the impact or effect it had. It makes clear requests for changes in future behaviour. Like a tune-up, it is intended to assist – an individual, a relationship, or a larger group. “Here’s something that you did which I’m concerned about or didn’t feel good to me. Here’s the impact it had, and what would have a more positive impact. Here’s some ideas on how that could look.”

Other examples of constructive feedback include the following:

- “When days go by without a response from you, I start imagining things. I’ve struggled with anxiety in the past. It would help me if you responded to my messages more quickly, even if it’s just to say you can’t respond fully yet.”
- “When you put food on the cooker and leave the room, I am concerned you will forget it. I’d prefer you to either stay in the room, or remove the food from the heat.”
- “When you send me really long written messages, I can feel overwhelmed. It would help me if you could send me shorter messages.”
- “When you gave me a week’s notice for a deadline, I felt frustrated. I would prefer to have at least two weeks notice. That would feel much better.”
- “When you excitedly interrupt during meetings, I find it harder to keep track of the conversation. Would you consider writing yourself a note and waiting your turn?”

Offering Constructive Feedback

Before Offering Feedback

Check your intention. Why are you offering this feedback? Ideally constructive feedback is offered to help someone learn, to strengthen a relationship, or to improve a group dynamic. Check-in with yourself that you’re offering it in that spirit. Are your intentions to share learning for yourself or the other person? Is this a small tension that can be easily addressed by offering short feedback? Or is it something bigger that would benefit from a more structured and held Clearing process? If so, spend some time on personal reflection (see [Personal Reflection](#)) and re-centering (see [Mindfulness - Re-Centering](#)). Seek to find a more peaceful, compassionate place in yourself, before offering feedback. This may include identifying any unmet needs which are affecting the situation, and making a request around this.

Check your emotions and needs. Do you feel emotionally triggered? Is there something that feels tangled, twisted, or painful inside? (see [Knowing What I Feel](#)). What needs do you have in relation to this feedback? Being on time? Leaving a space tidy? Listening when you’re explaining? A slower pace because you’re struggling to keep up? Reflect on your own



unmet needs (see a [‘needs’ list, like the one on the CNVC website](#)). If, after reflection, you realise you are motivated to offer feedback based on challenging emotions or unmet needs, you are probably holding a 'charge.' Offering feedback while holding a 'charge' is unlikely to be clean, clear, or helpful. You would more likely benefit from requesting a Clearing (see [Clearing Procedure](#)).

Find a good time that works for both of you. 'Knock on the Door.' Ask: "When is a good time to offer you some feedback." If not right away, arrange a time in the near future which is mutually convenient. Receiving feedback without any warning, or while trying to accomplish another task, can throw people off balance. Choosing a time with consideration makes feedback easier to both offer and receive, reducing the likelihood of defensive reaction. It can help to set a time boundary for the conversation and stick to it. Feedback is ideally simple, straightforward, and quick. "This will take 5 minutes, maximum."

Find a good setting. Check in about where and how someone prefers to receive feedback. This relates to personal style and preferences. Most often, feedback benefits from a neutral or comfortable space. Positioning can reduce discomfort: sitting or walking side by side may feel less confrontational than being directly head-on or face-to-face. Some people are more comfortable receiving feedback in a one-to-one situation with privacy. When getting consent on the timing for feedback, you can also decide on the setting. "Let's meet in the garden in 10 minutes. We'll find a quiet bench to sit on, and have a short chat."

While Offering Constructive Feedback

Start with the positive. Even though someone may struggle to recognise what they are doing well and what their strengths are, most people respond well to authentic appreciative feedback, encouragement, and affirmation. This can increase trust, minimise defensiveness, and increase receptivity to hearing constructive feedback.

Be honest. Avoid saying "that was great!" whilst thinking "that was awful!" Feedback that is only positive, without any suggestions for improvement, seldom relieves tensions or leads to learning. Without honest feedback, people will likely continue similar behaviours in the future, thinking 'business-as-usual' is satisfactory, or that they're doing things in a good way.

Be specific. Rather than making general comments such as "that was brilliant" or "that was awful", try to specify what the person did that was helpful and difficult and what effect it had on you. For example: "I really liked how well you prepared your talk, however I found it hard to take in so much data in such a short time."

Own your feedback. Speak from your own perspective. Use 'I' statements, beginning with 'I' or 'In my opinion.' Express yourself 'cleanly' by taking responsibility for your own emotions, preferences, and sensitivities. Avoid making universal judgments. Avoid blaming or pointing a finger at anyone, which typically increases defensiveness. For example, "Because



several people have been late for meetings, three times in the last month, I feel upset. I request that everyone is on time for meetings.” Ideally the feedback lets others know more about your experience. While you can briefly describe your emotions, constructive feedback is mostly intended to convey practical information.

Make clear requests. After identifying your needs, communicate about them clearly and directly. Make sure any requests for changes in behaviour are directly linked to information conveyed by your feedback.

Individuals and groups can both benefit from constructive feedback. When offering feedback to a group, include suggestions for both the group as a whole and for **specific individuals** where appropriate. In a group context, some individuals can learn more when feedback is made directly relevant to them.

Avoid criticism or personal attack. Limit your comments to **what people did, not who they are**. Focus on actions or behaviour but not people's personalities. Saying “You didn't do that very well” is enormously different from saying “You are useless.”

Be prepared for defensiveness, a common coping strategy to protect a vulnerability. Many people feel scared that constructive feedback may become critical, and may have a history of reacting to being criticised, blamed, or shamed by others. Try to imagine how you might feel in their situation, and how your words might be received (see [Empathy and Compassion](#)).

Receiving Constructive Feedback

Be curious about and open to constructive feedback – you can learn a lot from it. Assume there is something useful for you in the feedback. Frame it as a gift, an opportunity to learn about yourself in relation to others, transform your tendencies, and transition your group's culture. Even if the feedback is not delivered skillfully, try to be patient. Stay present and trust that there is something to learn from the feedback – even if it is simply observing your reactions.

Respect the offer. It may have taken a lot of courage for someone to offer you feedback. Don't miss the opportunity to learn, grow, or deepen your relationship. Even if it's not yet a good time for you to receive it, be open to receiving feedback and willing to find a good time later, so you can receive it.

Listen to the feedback. Hear the positive as well as the negative. Make sure you understand what is being said. Ask questions if you're unclear, or if you want more details about a specific aspect. Use 'active listening' to show you have received it. Summarise what was said, and ask if you have heard and interpreted the meaning correctly.



Try not to take it personally. Constructive feedback is typically not intended to be personally critical, hurtful, or to trigger an emotional reaction. It is ideally offered with the best of intentions for you, the other person, your relationship, and your entire group.

Notice your defensiveness and stay present. Take responsibility for your emotions arising. Try naming your emotions to help keep the situation authentic, and to support the other person to empathise with how you are feeling. Remember that the feedback is offered to help you learn. Avoid closing down entirely and pushing the other person away. Avoid countering every negative point with an excuse or explanation (sometimes called *feedback tennis*).

If you're finding the feedback too difficult, ask for it to stop. **Ask for time and space to reflect.** If you can't integrate it right away, offer thanks as simply as you can. "Thank you for the feedback. It feels uncomfortable. I need some time to think about it."

Thank the person for offering the feedback, if you authentically feel the feedback is intended to help your growth or relationship. Recognize their good intentions, courage, and time. Have empathy for how difficult it can be to both offer and receive feedback. Stay authentic and grounded, while avoiding fake 'niceness.' Confirm that you have heard their feedback, and reassure them that you will consider how to integrate it.

Consider the feedback, both positive and negative, and decide what you will do with it. A lot of personal development can happen while considering feedback. Be curious while considering the feedback. Feedback can feel helpful or unhelpful, true or untrue, or partially true and helpful. Does it contain anything true or helpful? You do not need to completely accept someone's feedback as absolute truth simply because it was offered.

If feedback feels unhelpful – maybe vague, or general, or coming with an unconscious 'charge' from the other person, – use your discernment to decide how much of it you accept. Part of the feedback might only be relevant to another's experience; part of it might feel relevant to you. Remain appreciative and respectful of the person who offered the feedback.

- Notice the various ways you feel about the feedback. How did it 'land' with you? If your initial reaction is defensive, the feedback may be touching on something sensitive or tender. Notice any internal contractions or clenching, perhaps indicating something for you to explore or learn. Be willing to look inward at aspects of yourself.
- Consider any new realisations about yourself along with their requests. What parts of the feedback can you integrate easily? What behaviours might you change in the future? What behaviours are you unwilling to change?
- Be kind to yourself. Realising your behaviours or actions have affected someone does not mean you are bad or wrong. Try to integrate the feedback with self-compassion and humour (see [Empathy and Compassion](#), see [Sharing and Celebrating Failings](#)).



Seek support when you need it. It might help to discuss any uncomfortable feedback with someone supportive, who knows you well and whose opinion you trust. Maybe ask, “Do you think this feedback is true? Or partially true? It’s so uncomfortable!” People who can be honest with you can often perceive some of your awareness gaps, and help you integrate even partially true feedback. This can be immensely helpful for your personal growth and development. Consider asking others to support you in making any intended behaviour changes (see [Seeking Support](#)).

Schedule another time to share your reflections. Maybe say, “This piece feels true and helpful, thank you for offering it. And that piece doesn’t feel so helpful to me.” View it as an opportunity for both of you to learn and grow.

Summary

In groups, feedback can be a way to share information with the intention of helping someone become more aware of a potentially unconscious behaviour or pattern which may have affected an individual or the group. Try allowing those who may be unused to offering or receiving feedback some time to practice -- not getting it quite right and trying again. During this time, a bit of patience, kindness, and compassion can often help (see [Feedback Culture](#); see [Sharing and Celebrating Failings](#)). Constructive feedback can be a helpful way for people and groups to learn about themselves, each other, and to strengthen their relationships.

Related Resources

[Transition in Group Culture](#)
[Clearing Procedure](#)
[Feedback Culture](#)
[Knowing What I Feel](#)
[Seeking Support](#)

[Personal Reflection](#)
[Mindfulness - Re-Centering](#)
[Sharing and Celebrating Failings](#)
[Empathy and Compassion](#)
[Offering Appreciation and Gratitude](#)



References

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CNVC. [Needs Inventory.](#)
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