Giving Feedback Effectively

The tips below are extracted from a fuller article on www.Mindtools.com

Check Your Motives

Before giving feedback, remind yourself why you are doing it. The purpose of giving feedback is to improve the situation or the person's performance. You won't accomplish that by being harsh, critical or offensive.

You'll likely get much more from people when your approach is positive and focused on improvement. That's not to say feedback always has to be good, but it should be fair and balanced.

Be Timely

The closer to the event you address the issue, the better. Feedback isn't about surprising someone, so the sooner you do it, the more the person will be expecting it. Think of it this way: it's much easier to provide feedback about a single, one-hour job that hasn't been done properly than it is to do so about a whole year of failed, one-hour jobs.

Tip:
If the situation involved is highly emotional, wait until everyone has calmed down before you engage in feedback. The recipient will more likely hear what you're saying, and you'll avoid saying something in the heat of the moment that you regret later.

Make It Regular

Feedback is a process that requires constant attention. When something needs to be said, say it. People then know where they stand all the time and there will be few surprises. Also, problems don't get out of hand. It's not a once-a-year or a once-every-three-month event. Though this may be the timing of formal feedback; informal, simple feedback should be given much more often than this – perhaps every week or even every day, depending on the situation.

With frequent, informal feedback like this, nothing said during formal feedback sessions should be unexpected, surprising or particularly difficult.

Prepare Your Comments

You don't want to read a script, but you do need to be clear about you are going to say. This will help you to stay on track and stick to the issues.

Be Specific

Tell the person exactly what he needs to improve. This ensures that you stick to facts and there is less room for ambiguity.

If you tell someone that she acted unprofessionally, what does that mean exactly? Was she too loud, too friendly, too casual, too flippant or too poorly dressed?

Remember to stick to what you know firsthand: you'll quickly find yourself on shaky ground if you start giving feedback based on other people's views.

Tip:

Try not to exaggerate to make a point. Avoid words like "never", "all," and "always" because the person will likely get defensive. Always discuss the direct impact of the behavior and don't get personal or seek to blame.

Criticize in Private

While public recognition is appreciated, public scrutiny is not.

Establish a safe place to talk where you won't be interrupted or overheard.

Use "I" Statements

Give feedback from your perspective. This way you avoid labeling the person.

Say, "I was angry and hurt when you criticized my report in front of my boss" rather than "You were insensitive yesterday."

Limit Your Focus

A feedback session should discuss no more than two issues. Any more than that and you risk the person feeling attacked and demoralized.

You should also stick to behaviors he can actually change or influence.

Talk About Positives Too

A good rule is to start off with something positive. This helps put the person at ease. It will also allow her to "see" what success looks like and what steps she needs to take next time to get it right. Try to end on a high note, too. Otherwise, she may be left feeling despondent and worthless.

Tip:

Many people tend to overdo this and end up sandwiching the constructive feedback between too many positives. Then the takeaway message becomes, "Gee, I'm doing really well," instead of "I'm good at communicating with customers, but I need to bring my interpersonal skills with my co-workers up to that same level."

Provide Specific Suggestions

Make sure you both know what needs to be done to improve the situation. The main message should be that you care and want to help the person grow and develop. Set goals and make plans to monitor and evaluate his progress.

Tip:

You may not agree on everything, so it is a good idea to ask the person to give her perspective. Use phrases like, "What is your reaction to this?" or "Is this a fair representation of what happened?"

Listen actively to what she has to say and try to get her to offer some suggestions for improvement. This way she has an opportunity to own the solution and will be more likely to follow through with it. To avoid sounding like you're preaching, stay away from words like "good," "bad," "must," "need to," etc.

Follow Up
The whole purpose of feedback is to improve performance. You need to measure whether or not that is happening and then make adjustments as you go. Be sure to document your conversations and discuss what is working and what needs to be modified.

Key Points
Feedback is a two-way street. You need to know how to give it effectively and how to receive it constructively.

When you make a conscious choice to give and receive feedback on a regular basis you demonstrate that it is a powerful means of personal development and positive change. Done properly, feedback need not be agonizing, demoralizing or daunting, and the more practice you get the better you will become at it. It may never be your favorite means of communicating with your team members, co-workers or your boss, but it does have the potential to make your workplace a much more productive and harmonious place to be.