FEEDBACK RULES

In life as much as in work, it's important to know how to provide feedback to others, effectively and constructively without causing offence. There are many opportunities in life for providing others with feedback, from commenting on the way that your colleague has carried out a task, to discussing your children's behaviour with them. In this Appendix we focus on the process of communicating with someone about something that they have done or said, with a view to changing or encouraging that behaviour. This is often called 'giving feedback', and when you do, you want your feedback to be effective.

The guidelines for giving constructive feedback fall into four categories: content, manner, timing, and frequency.

Content
Content is what you say in the constructive feedback.
- *In your first sentence, identify the topic or issue that the feedback will be about.*
- *Provide the specifics of what occurred.*

Without the specifics, you only have praise or criticism. Start each key point with an "I" message, such as, "I have noticed," "I have observed," "I have seen," or when the need exists to pass on feedback from others, "I have had reported to me." "I" messages help you be issue-focused and get into the specifics.

Manner
Manner is how you say the constructive feedback. As you may know, how you say something often carries more weight than what you have to say — manner is an important element when giving feedback.

Timing
Feedback is meant to be given in real-time, as close as possible to when the performance incident occurs so that the events are fresh in everyone's minds. When feedback is given well after the fact, the value of the constructive feedback is lessened. When giving negative feedback, you may want to apply a different timeline: ASAR (as soon as reasonable/ready — that is, when *you're* ready). Sometimes when an incident happens, you aren't feeling too good about it, and you need time to cool off and get your thoughts in order before you give negative feedback (so that your manner displays a tone of concern). Doing that may mean giving the feedback tomorrow rather than right now, but tomorrow is still timely, and your feedback will come across as far more constructive.

Frequency
This last guideline is the most important because it makes all the other guidelines work. Use constructive feedback regularly to acknowledge real performance. Try to catch and respond to people doing their job right just as much as you catch and respond to them doing something not quite right — and don't acknowledge how they are performing only sporadically.

Constructive feedback is information-specific, issue-focused, and based on observations. It comes in two varieties: Praise and criticism are both personal judgments about a performance effort or outcome, with praise being a favorable judgment and criticism, an

unfavorable judgment. Information given is general and vague, focused on the person, and based on opinions or feelings. Don't get this wrong, to give praise for example is a good thing when it is deserved, but it's not constructive feedback since it's a personal judgment. Remember that you are making no comment on what type of person they are, or what they believe or value. You are only commenting on how they behaved. Do not be tempted to discuss aspects of personality, intelligence or anything else. Only behaviour.

Feedback should describe the effect of the person's behaviour on you. After all, you do not know the effect on anyone or anything else. You only know how it made **you** feel or what **you** thought. Presenting feedback as your opinion makes it much easier for the recipient to hear and accept it, even if you are giving negative feedback. After all, they have no control over how you felt, any more than you have any control over their intention. This approach is a blame-free one, which is therefore much more acceptable. Some useful phrases for giving feedback include: "When you did X, I felt Y". "I noticed that when you said X, it made me feel Y". "I really liked the way you did X and particularly Y about it". "It made me feel really X to hear you say Y in that way".

In positive feedback situations, express appreciation. Appreciation alone is praise. Yet when you add it to the specifics of constructive feedback, your message carries an extra oomph of sincerity. For example: "Sue, your handling of all the processing work while John did the callbacks made for an efficient effort and showed good teamwork. Everything you did was accurate, as well. Thanks so much for helping out. Such initiative is a real value to the team." Always keep in mind to give at least as much positive feedback as you do negative. Positive feedback stimulates the reward centers in the brain, leaving the recipient open to taking new direction. Meanwhile, negative feedback indicates that an adjustment needs to be made and the threat response turns on and defensiveness sets in. You don't need to avoid negative, or corrective, feedback altogether. Just make sure you follow it up with a suggested solution or outcome.

In negative feedback situations, express concern. A tone of concern communicates a sense of importance and care and provides the appropriate level of sincerity to the message. Tones such as anger, frustration, disappointment, and the ever-popular sarcasm tend to color the language of the message and turn attempts at negative feedback into criticism. The content of the message gets lost in the noise and harshness. The purpose of negative feedback is to create awareness that can lead to correction or improvement in performance. If you can't give negative feedback in a helpful manner, in the language and tone of concern, you defeat its purpose. Your feedback usually won't be productive if it's focused on making the other person feel bad or make them look foolish in front of peers.

Be specific. People generally respond better to specific, positive direction. Avoid saying things like, "You need to be more talkative in meetings." It's too ambiguous and can be interpreted in a lot of personal ways. Say something specific and positive pointed at the task you want accomplished, such as, "You're smart. I want to hear at least one opinion from you in every meeting we're in together going forward."

Be direct when delivering your message. Get to the point and avoid beating around the bush. Both negative and positive feedback should be given in a straightforward manner.

Be sincere and avoid giving mixed messages. Sincerity says that you mean what you say with care and respect. Mixed messages are referred to as "yes, but" messages. For example, "John, you have worked hard on this project, but. . . ." What follows is something the person is not doing well and is the real point of the message. The word "but," along with its cousins "however" and "although," when said in the middle of a thought, create contradictions or mixed messages. In essence, putting "but" in the middle tells the other person, "Don't believe a thing I said before."

State observations, not interpretations. Observations are what you see occur; interpretations are your analysis or opinion of what you see occur. Tell what you've noticed, not what you think of it, and report the behaviour you notice at a concrete level, instead of as a characterization of the behaviour. Observations have a far more factual and nonjudgmental aspect than do interpretations.

RECEIVING FEEDBACK: USEFUL TIPS

It's also important to reflect on what skills you need to receive feedback. Especially when it is something you do not want to hear, and not least because not everyone is skilled at giving feedback.

Be open to the feedback. In order to process feedback, you need to at least listen to it. Just listen, don't think already about what you are going to say in reply. Also notice the non-verbal communication and listen to what your team member, coach or mentor is not saying, as well as what they are.

For example, you might say: "So when you said …, would it be fair to say that you meant … and felt …?""Have I understood correctly that when I did …, you felt …?"Make sure that your reflection and questions focus on **behaviour**, and not personality. Even if the feedback has been given at another level, you can always return the conversation to the behavioural, and help the person giving feedback to focus on that level.

Thank you. Always thank the person who has given you the feedback. They have already seen that you have listened and understood, now accept it. Acceptance in this way does not mean that you need to act on it. However, you do then need to consider the feedback, and decide how, if at all, you wish to act upon it. That is entirely up to you, but remember that the person giving the feedback felt strongly enough to bother mentioning it to you. Do them the courtesy of at least giving the matter some consideration. If nothing else, with negative feedback, you want to know how **not** to generate that response again.