

Seeds for Change Short guide



Feedback

A guide to giving and receiving feedback in campaign groups and co-ops

Introduction

Feedback is information from other people about their experience or perspective on something we've done. By definition, this is information we can't have unless someone else tells us. When members of a group regularly give each other feedback, it helps to develop skills and be accountable to each other. It can also build stronger relationships and healthier group dynamics. Feedback therefore helps make non-hierarchical groups possible. In co-ops where there's no boss, or campaign groups where people's engagement might depend on feeling things are working, feedback is an important part of sustaining the group.

This guide is written for non-hierarchical groups, workplaces and educational settings. Examples could include doing peer reviews at work, raising an issue with someone in a voluntary group or getting input on a leaflet you've made. The tips we've included could also be useful for purely personal relationships, or 'traditional' hierarchical workplaces.

Why consider how to give and receive feedback?

Our automatic responses to a situation can work well - but not always! This guide is written for situations when you want to think carefully about how to give or receive feedback. We have focused on situations where you want to maintain a good relationship with the other people involved. We emphasise being both honest and respectful, offering your perspective but also trying to understand other people's.

Sometimes this will not be your first priority. For example, in a situation where someone has done you serious harm, or if there is a big imbalance of power between you on the topic under discussion. We have tried to flag up when we think the advice we're giving might be particularly inappropriate in contexts of harm or power imbalance.

General principles for feedback

Timing: It is usually good to raise issues relatively soon after something happened. Praise is most relevant when we can remember what it was for! And bad feelings can escalate if they go unspoken. A general guideline would be to give yourself enough time to reflect and get in the right frame of mind, but not too much more.

Building self-awareness: We all have personal and cultural habits for how we approach feedback. For example, maybe we don't raise issues at all, or we automatically reject feedback people give us. By becoming more aware of our habits, we can reflect on how they affect different situations. This may enable us to make different choices if we want to.

Recognising different perspectives: We can only really see the world through our own eyes, and it can be hard to accept that other people see things very differently. However, if someone does something that doesn't work for us, it's not necessarily because they've done something 'wrong'.

Remember the positives: Frequent appreciation and recognition of what people do well improves morale, relationships and helps people build their skills. Praise can be offered alongside critical feedback. However, people may not really hear positives when they are offered alongside negatives. Regularly noticing and telling people what you like about them may have a better impact!

Recognising strong feelings: Communicating can be much harder when you have very strong feelings on the topic. It may be easier to listen to other people and express yourself clearly if you give your feelings attention separately from the feedback conversation.



Disclaimer: we are not saying that being calm and non-emotional should be a condition for being heard! This attitude is called 'tone policing', and can be extremely disempowering if someone needs to raise something they are distressed or angry about.

Giving feedback

What's your purpose in giving feedback?

Getting clear about what you are trying to achieve can help guide your decisions about how to approach the situation. For example, do you need to off-load some feelings in order to prevent resentment from building? Or you're concerned that someone is feeling under-valued, and you want to counter-balance that by appreciating what they do?



What's really going on for you?

Especially when you're upset or angry, it's easy to focus more on other people, e.g. blaming them for the situation, worrying how they'll respond to what you say etc. You can often be more true to what you really want to say and communicate more clearly if you start by focusing on yourself.

It is particularly helpful to work out if strong reactions you are having may be partly caused by something outside the situation, e.g. the mood you're in, or similar things happening in the past. These reactions are still important and valid, but may not be the responsibility of the person you are raising the issue with.

How will you approach the situation?

What methods work best can vary depending on the people, relationship and situation. For example, options that can work well in the right context include: making a joke of the issue, dropping hints, or having an argument and then making up afterwards. The methods we share here work best in situations where we want to be clear, straight-forward and limit bad feelings from escalating - even when we're talking to someone who we don't already have a strong relationship with.

Are you the right person to give the feedback?

If raising the issue will have a big emotional cost for you, could you ask someone else to raise it on your behalf? This is especially relevant if you've been harmed by the other person, or you want to point out an oppressive behaviour that affects you.

If you want to raise something that impacts someone else, think whether this will be helpful. For example, if you're concerned about how a co-worker is being treated you could check in with them before speaking to other colleagues. If you want to tell a venue about a range of ways they are inaccessible that don't exclude you personally you could do online research to make sure anything you say is accurate.

Picking the right time and place

For example:

- If someone does the same behaviour a lot, you could wait until next time, and be ready with your response in the moment.
- If someone's behaviour varies, you could recognise the times when it works for you (e.g.: "I really appreciated how clean the kitchen was this morning.")
- You could give the other person the headlines of what you want to talk about, and agree a time to chat.
- In a group, think whether to add an issue to a meeting agenda, so people have time to reflect - or wait to raise it in person so you can explain more clearly.

Who should be there?

In general, positive feedback can be delivered in front of anyone. If a negative issue relates to just one or two people in a group, raise it privately, unless you need the support of the group to bring it up. If possible, a face-to-face chat is usually better for an emotionally difficult issue than online or leaving a note!

Exactly what do you want to say?

A method that we find helpful is:

1. Name specific behaviours someone's done
2. Tell them the impact of those behaviours.

For example: "I appreciate you sorting out all those files and making indexes. Yesterday it was much quicker to find the information I needed." "You asked someone new to join the group without asking the rest of us. I got annoyed, because we agreed we'd talk in a meeting before inviting anyone new." See more detail below:

1. Name specific behaviours

Exactly what have the other people done or said? Or, sometimes, not done or said! Is this a one-off or a pattern? Naming specific behaviours usually helps to make communication clearer.

If the feedback is negative, this helps to make it less personal and more accurate. Compare a general statement like "You don't listen to me" with "You started talking over me when I was explaining something that was important to me". Being specific can help with positive feedback too - if you tell someone "You're great" they may simply hear that you want to be nice to them! If you give more information you demonstrate you've really paid attention to what they've done: "The campaign leaflets you made brought everyone's ideas together and put across our politics powerfully."

Where possible separate your interpretation from what they actually did! For example "You've been late five times this month" is a fact about someone's behaviour, whereas "You don't care about this co-op" is just what you believe.

2. Name the impact(s)

What are your reasons for liking/not liking the behaviours? What hopes or concerns do you have? You may think the impacts are obvious - but often our responses are more personal than we acknowledge. We've listed

different types of impacts here - pick what's relevant to you.

Practical

What happened (or might happen) as a result of the behaviour?

Practical impacts might still be personal to you, e.g.: "Your facilitation was too fast-paced for me. I didn't have time to think about the questions before you moved us on, so I didn't really input into the decision." Or they could be more general impacts, e.g. "You spent a lot of time talking in the meeting and it meant we didn't hear some people's views."

Feelings

Explaining how you feel helps someone understand and empathise, even if they don't share your evaluation of what happened. Communication guides usually recommend avoiding the phrase 'you make me feel' and simply say 'when you do x, I feel...' This acknowledges the emotional impact of what someone has done without implying that that impact was necessarily their fault.

Narratives

A lot of the emotional impact of what someone does can be about how we interpret it. For example, if someone in a group doesn't listen we may be annoyed about the practical impact, e.g. they don't act on the information we give them, or the conversation goes round in circles with lots of repetition. However, we are likely to feel extra strongly about it if our interpretation is that they don't listen because they don't think we have anything worth saying, for example.

Our interpretation may have nothing to do with someone's intention, or the reason they did something. However, beliefs and interpretations are a big part of our experience so bringing them into the open can help clear things up. Try acknowledging your interpretations for what they are, e.g. "Where I jump to in my head when you say that is...", "I know you may see this differently, but to me that sounds like..."

Asking for feedback

Often the best way to get someone else's input on what we are doing is to directly ask them for feedback. This could be because we want to learn a new skill, because we suspect they have concerns they're not voicing, or just to make space for open communication.

Some questions to consider:

Do you really want feedback? Sometimes, we ask someone's opinion, but what we really want is reassurance! In this situation, we can get annoyed or defensive if what we get back feels too critical. If you want someone to tell you that you're doing OK, could you ask them for that? If you want balanced feedback, but find criticism difficult, is there a way to make it easier for yourself?

What do you really want out of the feedback? Being clear about this can make what you get back much more useful. For example, do you have a particular concern, e.g.: "I'm trying to work on letting go and micro-managing less when I work with people. What's your experience of me in relation to that?" Or is there particular information that will be useful to you, e.g. "I don't want to change the messages of the article, I just want feedback on whether it comes across clearly."

Will giving feedback be a lot of work? Can you make the job easier for the people giving feedback? For example, by letting them say how and when the feedback should happen, or asking them focused questions to help make it a smaller job.

Are you really open to changing? Be realistic about how much notice you intend to take of the feedback. For example, if you show someone a website design you think is finished, you might react badly if they suggest major changes. Can you be clear with them, e.g. "I'm hoping not to spend too much more time on this, so can you stick to changes that seem really important, or quick tweaks."

Receiving feedback

The first question to ask yourself is whether you need to take someone's feedback on board. For example, could it be useful to you? Do you have a responsibility to listen, e.g. because you've done something that affects someone else? Sometimes, people make personal comments or offer unsolicited advice on things which aren't really any of their business! In which case, it is totally up to you how you engage. On the other hand, there are plenty of situations where hearing someone else's perspective can be extremely helpful, even if it is uncomfortable.

Notice how you are feeling

By noticing your feelings, you have more choices about how to respond. For example, some people respond to praise by getting embarrassed or immediately dismiss it as insincere. Noticing you're doing that may help you pause, and try to hear it instead.

It is particularly important to recognise when you are feeling defensive because this makes it harder to really hear what's being said. Defensive behaviours to look out for include:

- interrupting
- saying 'yes, but...'
- shifting attention away from the content of the other person's message (e.g. focusing on how they said it, telling them you're having a difficult time, or that they've also behaved in ways you don't like).

Looking after yourself

If you want to listen but you're finding it hard, try reminding yourself that the feedback they are offering is just their perspective. You don't have to share their views, just focus on trying to understand them. In most cases,

it's OK to ask for a bit of space before continuing the conversation. Usually the conversation will go best for both people if you have the chance to get yourself in a mood where you can actually listen.

Listen

Focus on understanding where someone is coming from. Let them speak until they've finished, if you can. Try looking out for the things they've said which you agree with, rather than focusing on the things you don't. Thank them, if you can be sincere. Raising an issue often takes courage and effort, and it helps to acknowledge that.

Ask questions to clarify (not to interrogate or pick apart what they're saying). Try helping them to get more specific about your actual behaviour, e.g. "When you say I 'never' help out, can you give me examples of times you hoped I'd help and I didn't?" "You said I am 'disruptive' in meetings, are there particular things I do that bother you?" You might also ask them to expand on the impacts of what you do, e.g.: "Can you tell me more about why that's a problem for you?" or "How do you feel when I do that?"

Summarise to check your understanding. Try to make a clear distinction between what they've actually said ("If I've understood you right, I think you're saying...") and the interpretations you're making ("I realise you've not said this in so many words, but what I'm hearing is...")

Offer your perspective if appropriate

Sometimes it can be too soon, or not helpful at all, to give your perspective. For example, if someone is really hurt and has gone to the effort of raising something, anything you say might sound like making excuses. However, if you do think it will be helpful for your relationship, your group or in order to resolve the issue, you might explain your behaviour, or why you think it is justified, or tell them that you have a different memory of the event they described.

Looking for a way forward

The process for finding a way forward will depend a lot on whether the issue has a roughly equal impact on both of you. If one person or group has a lot more at stake than others, the fairest arrangement might simply be for them to decide what happens next. Sometimes this is a case of setting a simple boundary: "I have to pick my kids up from school, so I can't do shifts after 3pm." or "Call me 'she', not 'he.'" When the issue has a significant impact on everyone involved, there will need to be a more complicated negotiation to work out what is fair. Our guide to *Consensus Decision Making* gives more detail on how to come up with solutions that work for everyone. Here are some basic tips:

Getting back to needs

Sometimes we can get stuck because the things we want seem to be incompatible. One person might like to do things well in advance while another person prefers to do things last minute. Try to work out the underlying needs you are each trying to meet, for example feeling motivated, or feeling confident you'll complete the task on time.

Try coming up with new ideas

Look for ways that everyone can meet their core needs. Sometimes those solutions are obvious - e.g. if one person needs background music to concentrate, and the other person silence, could you get a pair of good quality headphones? Sometimes the situation is more complex, and you may need to come up with an imperfect solution and just give it a try.

Evaluation

Can you plan a review meeting a few weeks (or months) down the line, so no-one has to do the work of raising the issue from scratch? This could be to test the impacts of the solutions you came up with, or it can be a good way of staying on track if you've committed to changing your behaviour.

Feedback

Sharing feedback regularly helps members of a group to develop skills, build stronger relationships, and be accountable to each other. This guide offers tips on how to give and receive feedback in a way that is most useful for you and your group. It is written for non-hierarchical groups, workplaces and educational settings.

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