

Feedback That Works: How to Build and Deliver Your Message

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Effective feedback, whether it's meant for your boss, your peers, or your direct reports, is built around three ideas. One, focus on the situation. Two, describe the other person's behavior you observed in that situation. And third, describe the impact that behavior had on you. The result is a message that is clear and that can inspire action and productive change.

Executive Summary

Oftentimes managers who develop specific “what if” scenarios and examine business data with the intense rigor of a scientist use no such specifics or data when evaluating the company's most important capital: employee performance. Information about performance, delivered in a way that is clear, nonjudgmental, and specific, helps all employees identify ways in which they can improve. Effective feedback requires that you use the same attention to detail that you employ when analyzing business information to the development of your leadership skills.

During the course of giving feedback to tens of thousands of people over many years, CCL has developed a feedback technique we call SBI, shorthand for Situation-Behavior-Impact. Using this technique, you can deliver feedback that can help the recipient see more easily what actions he or she can take to continue to improve performance or to change behavior that is ineffective or even an obstacle to performance.

The SBI technique can be described by its three components. The first step in giving effective feedback is to capture and clarify the specific situation in which the behavior occurred. Describing behavior is the second step to giving effective feedback. The final step in giving effective feedback is to relay the impact that the other person's behavior had on you.

As you practice this technique and put it into action, there are some pitfalls of which you should be aware. For example, don't back out of the feedback with “second thoughts.” Don't cushion your feedback with such phrases as “You aren't going to want to hear this . . .” as it tends to put your audience on the defensive.

Review the situation, behavior, and impact steps that build effective feedback and practice those steps at every opportunity. Take time to reflect on your feedback efforts. As you become more familiar with the approach and more comfortable with the delivery, your feedback skills will become more and more effective, and the people around you will benefit from your improved leadership in this area.