

# FEEDBACK



## SOLICITING AND GIVING FEEDBACK

Does anyone like to give or receive feedback? If I asked you to come into my office, closed the door, and announced that I had feedback for you—what would you be thinking? Perhaps, “Oh no...it must be bad news...” Would you ever imagine that I wanted to take the time to speak fully about something you are doing well? Probably not. With all the time and attention placed on feedback in organizations, why is giving *and* receiving it still such a problem?

The answer (in part) is that we are “assessment machines,” jumping to conclusions with very little data, and then reticent to share our judgments. We unconsciously recognize the flaws in the process *and* we don’t want to be judged. Or, we marshal our courage and get agreement from others and then largely “dump” judgment on someone. And since we, as individuals, have a long history of being judged and often not quite measuring up, we are even less practiced at questioning the giver of feedback and peeling-the-onion to discover the value.

### *This material will:*

- Distinguish the feedback conversation and what makes it useful.
- Offer a mindset that helps you neutralize your judgments as part of feedback.
- Make the case for crystallizing you intentions.

## FEEDBACK IS ABOUT USEFUL INFORMATION

Feedback can be a very powerful conversation. At its best, feedback is a conversation that provides useful information on the current state against the expectations of a particular situation. The power is in generating new awareness and action either about something that is going well, or something that is not.

To deliver powerful feedback, emphasize both the *information* and its *usefulness*. Too often, a feedback conversation centers on assessment and opinion, with a scattering of



examples. In fact, the assessment language is usually least valuable, yet it is unavoidable. Most valuable are the facts and observations in counterpoint to expectations, which are presented as observable data. For example, if you have feedback for a peer about “not listening to customers,” how will your peer know what you mean? Here’s a typical dialogue.

Jack: *Sara, I wanted to give you some feedback.*

Sara: *Okay, what? (gulp)*

“Feedback is a conversation that provides useful information.”

Jack: *I think you are not listening to your customers. You need to stop doing all the talking and really listen to their concerns and interests.*

Sara: *I’m not sure what you mean! I listen to my customers every day. I ask lots of questions; they tell me what they need; and, I deliver great service. Where is this coming from? (And, if your Sara doesn’t actually say this, she is probably thinking it.)*

Jack: *It’s not one place, it’s a general comment. I’ve noticed that you don’t seem to probe for understanding, and you often move right into a “pitch” rather than ask follow-up questions.*

Sara: *That’s not my experience.*

Jack: *OK, fine. Well, you might want to think about it. (And, if Jack was Sara’s manager, he would probably give a few more examples that also don’t have much information in them. In either case, Sara would be left without a rich set of data to inform her next actions with her customers.)*

### Are You “On Automatic”?

We are indeed “on automatic”. Each day we wake up and immediately start assessing: Am I late? Is the weather good? Do I feel like exercising? And, then we walk down the stairs making assessments about the distance of each step to the next. We maneuver in rush hour traffic, anticipating the type of lunatic who too often shows up at a particular on-ramp. Or, we move with the sea of commuters, flowing right to the metrocard dispenser that has a shorter line. We don’t think about any of these situations. We simply move through the day with a data point or two and, “snap,” we have made a judgment. Don’t fight it. It’s the way we are. It’s what keeps us safe and eases our path. But, if you have important feedback, don’t count on that snap judgment to be based on sufficient facts or to be very helpful.



## CLARIFY YOUR INTENTION AND MAKE IT POSITIVE

There is little to no perfection available in this world of human assessment and feedback conversations. You can't wait to have all the data. You won't be able to craft the perfect language. And, you'll never know what's truly behind the complex nature of the person you are talking to. That said, you can make up for most of that imperfection through positive intention.

You know when someone has the general intention to support you and help you to be successful. Usually, you know or can feel it when someone does not have a positive intention. Or you think you do. With feedback conversations in particular, you could easily misjudge someone's intent or be misjudged because of the anxiety inherent in delivering the message.

What is your intent? Be honest. If your first response is, "I want him to change his ways and stop making problems for me," then you will likely transmit that into your message in some way. Stop and consider a more useful intention. Here's an all-purpose intention for feedback:

*"I want you to get the benefit of my information in order to determine whether and what you might want to keep doing, stop doing, or change. It's your decision."*

You might not say this, although you could. You plan the conversation with the feeling and respect behind the intent.

There are two types of intention: general and specific. We have just covered the first; the second is any intended outcome for the conversation. Maybe you want to open up a dialogue, clarify expectations going forward, understand what happened, or ensure the person knows you value him or her. From that starting point, you can envision a more specific outcome. For example, you may state your intent as "I want to understand what Sara does and says to understand her clients' needs, and I want to present my feedback in a way that will enhance her thinking and actions."

Now, this approach doesn't indicate that as a person's manager you don't have an interest in the person changing or have some consequence if he or she doesn't. You certainly have the accountability to ensure Sara knows your expectations. But, you can fulfill that accountability with a positive intention for the conversation and outcome.



## OPINION VERSUS GROUNDED ASSESSMENTS

We form **opinions** based on:

- *The culture and thinking* we have adopted during our lifetime—the country, family, education, teachers, colleagues, friends and companies in which we have participated
- *Our historical experience*—what we know and what we have done and how we have seen people behave with approval, etc.
- Our organization’s expectations whether written or oral
- *The data we have*—directly and by third-party
- *Our confidence*—and how boldly we have learned to express ourselves
- *The implication of consequences*—high-positive and high-negative consequences generating more definitive opinions

A **grounded assessment** is an opinion based on the comparison of a reasonable set of data against clear expectations. Remember, clear expectations replicate facts and observations. Telling Sara that you expect her to “start each customer meeting by asking the customer what he or she would like to accomplish or learn” is a lot clearer than saying she needs to “engage the customer.” What do you mean by *engage*?

“Your opinions are never the Truth”  
(with a capital T).

Here’s a major takeaway: Whether grounded or not, **your opinions/assessments are never the “Truth” (with a capital T)** about anyone or anything. All you would need to do is change the expectations or add more data. For example, with only two data points on expectation, Jack is quite vulnerable with Sara. What if she were to share ten or twelve situations that have quite different information? What if you talked to a customer who said, “Sara and I have had far-ranging conversations about my needs.”

The bottom line is that whatever words you use, they are never the truth. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking they have a precise meaning that another will discern. And, since words are the vehicle for communication—*choose your words carefully*.



## THE PROCESS

For feedback conversations, your planning is crucial to success. The four-step process is as follows:

### Step #1: Gather the Information

Unless you are engaging in an exploratory conversation such as, “Let’s talk about the project and jointly develop a view of the current state,” you will likely make some key mistakes unless you prepare. Take the time to do a “data dump” and cull that data to ensure you are getting to observations and facts. Too often, we mistake a fact for an opinion. For example, you can refine an initial opinion that someone is “too introverted” by stating, “She is quiet in meetings.” The refined statement is still an opinion, just possibly somewhat more descriptive. In contrast, facts would be the number of meetings in which she does not speak and responds only to direct questions, etc.

How does one develop a good set of facts and observations? Start by laying out what you have seen, your observations, and any other facts, organizing the information into natural groupings. Think about it as dumping all the actual data in your brain onto a piece of paper. It doesn’t take as long as you think—likely only five minutes or less. Notice whether you have more than a handful of items. If you don’t, you may change your tactics and abandon the feedback conversation for an exploratory one. In our case above, you assume you have the following facts and observations:

#### Facts & Observations

- Tuesday, Sara started a customer meeting by talking for 10 minutes about the product features.
- In three sales meetings this month, Sara’s report took 20 minutes when others’ reports took 5 minutes each.
- In a joint customer meeting last week, Sara responded to a customer’s objection with “Let me clarify that point. We don’t...” rather than asking a question about the customer’s concern.
- Sara regularly disagrees with me, with emotion, without asking me what I mean and why I said what I said.



You can see by the data points that Jack’s data comes from both customer interactions and sales meetings. Including these facts could have modified or enhanced the usefulness of Jack’s message.

Next, enrich your information by adding facts from other conversations, formal or informal, with other parties, perhaps over a broader span of time. The broader and deeper your information, the better your assessment will be.

## Step #2: Sort and Match Against Expectations

Categorize your facts and observations to establish how much you know about specific aspects. Then match the categories against your expectations (also facts and observations). Finally, reflect on the degree of clarity for each expectation, and whether there are other expectations that you have missed. Often, we find that we were not quite clear about our expectations. If so, use the facts and observations to clarify your expectations. For example:

Expectations	Facts & Observations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start each customer meeting by asking the customer what he or she would like to accomplish or learn.</li> <li>• Share your key points in a few minutes and allow others to ask questions rather than assume you know what they want.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tuesday, Sara started a customer meeting by talking for 10 minutes about the product features.</li> <li>• In three sales meetings this month, Sara’s report took 20 minutes when others’ reports took 5 minutes each.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Before responding to any complaint with your reasons, ask questions to clarify the objection.</li> <li>• Even when you think you know what someone means, and especially if you have a strong reaction, ask questions about the meaning behind their words. For example, “I think I know what you mean, but can you tell me what you mean by “poor quality.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In a joint customer meeting last week, Sara responded to a customer’s objection with “Let me clarify that point. We don’t...” rather than asking a question about the customer’s concern.</li> <li>• Sara regularly disagrees with me, with emotion, without asking me what I mean and why I said what I said.</li> </ul>

At this point, you can also ask yourself the question, “Have I discussed any or all of these expectations with Sara and when?” Don’t kick yourself if you can’t recall an



expectations conversation. We can't and don't talk about all the expectations we might have. Getting the information right is the basis for develop a solid message.

### Step #3: Develop the Message for the Person

Now you are ready to express your grounded assessment. There are four parts to the message: **Expectation, Facts & Observations, Assessment, and Impact.**

#### Expectations and Facts & Observations

We have covered the first two:

- ~ Your expectations are *exactly* what you want to see, hear, and have.
- ~ Facts and observations are your current dataset.

"Choose your assessment language carefully"

#### Assessment

Develop a grounded assessment that *says what you mean to say. Carefully phrase your assessment*: Instead of saying that Sara is **not listening to customers**, you might say she **responds immediately to customer concerns rather than probing to ensure she understands**. What's the difference? The first implies negative intent, the second focuses on the observed actions. In addition, the second may tap into Sara concerns about "understanding her customers." To deliver the most successful message, you must understand both sales people and Sara. Ultimately, you want to choose words that will send the meaning you intend and open the door to dialogue.

#### Impact

Part of the message is the impact that the current state has on:

- a. *Results*—hard business results, softer organizational impact, etc.
- b. *The person*—what reputation, relationships, career potential, employment status, etc.
- c. *Others*—the other side of the relationship, their effectiveness, etc.
- d. *You*—your time, effectiveness, relationships, etc.



Sometimes you may want or need to lead with the impact; other times you may choose to weave the impact into the dialogue. But, in almost every situation, providing clear impact is important and valuable context for new action or required change. For positive feedback, the impact element is just as important. If you are soliciting feedback, you will also want to probe for impact.

#### Step #4: Engage the person in dialogue

So often, especially in manager-direct report conversations, the manager is the primary speaker. For all but the very simple feedback conversations, you want to create a dialogue—a shared discussion of the information and ideas for future action.

Lastly, think about how you will begin the conversation. In our example for Sara, you might—

**Start by soliciting interest:** “Sara, I have been noticing some things that occur in customer conversations that might interest you.” If you really have good information for her, Sara is likely to be interested. At least you can assume that.

**Or, start with setting expectations:** “Sara, I don’t think we have talked specifically about engaging customers to understand their concerns and interests specifically before (or for awhile). Let’s talk about what you are noticing and what I’m seeing.”

**Or, you might start with a question like:** “Did you notice that Charlie Customer didn’t seem to let go of his concern, even though you had given him a lot of reasons?” You could find out what Sara is noticing before you launch into an assessment.

**Or, if the feedback has a serious consequence that likely will grab Sara’s attention, you may lead with the impact:** “Sara, I am worried about your customer retention rate. I’ve been making some observations. Let’s talk about how we expect you to engage with customers to understand their concerns and interests.”

Notice that none of these openers start with “I have some feedback to discuss.” And all of them leave the door wide open for Sara to speak to present her facts and observations. The secret to reducing or alleviating resistance is to focus back on the facts rather than defend your assessment!





## ...AND PEOPLE ARE FUNNY ~ THINK ABOUT THE PERSON

When presenting feedback, more than in any conversation, we have to consider what we know about the person. Some questions you might want to consider as you plan your message or your conversation include:

1. Why would or should s/he be interested to hear your information? Build your answer into your opening or invitation.
2. What are the typical concerns that s/he brings up? You might start with “I know you care a lot about...”
3. Is s/he emotional or tough? How and when? Be careful not to overlook that tough people can also be resistant or sensitive to critical feedback.
4. What about her/his background informs your feedback? Use your assumptions about how and why the person is doing what you want or not in how you discuss the matter: “I know that this is your first corporate role. How did you operate in the consulting world?”

And don't forget that you have your own “funniness.” Be open about what you know: “You may not know this, but I have a strong view on how to approach this. Let me tell you why.”

And, if you find that any conversation is tense, you can stop and talk about that tension rather than overlook it. You might say, “Let's stop and discuss what is making this conversation difficult.”

## LEARN AND GAIN VALUE FROM SOLICITING FEEDBACK

We have talked about feedback from the “giver” perspective. And, we've talked about good feedback as being useful information. So, why are you waiting to solicit feedback for your own use? Try this conversation with anyone with whom you work, live, or consider important:

1. Sara, I am very interested in your perspective (make it light and sincere). Would you be willing to share with me what:
  - a. Annoys you about how I manage/parent/ work with you/etc.?



- b. What I do that really helps you be effective/enjoy the day/learn/etc.?
2. (Sara response “Sure”) Great! Just start by saying whatever comes to mind. I’ll do all the work to get clear on what you mean.  
  
(Sara responds “What? I don’t know...”) Well, I know it’s unusual, but I would really like to know. I realize I may not know what you think, or perhaps I assume certain things. I’m really interested.
  3. (Whatever Sara says...) “Can you tell me about a couple of situations where I did/said that? Or, provide an example” Then, peel-the-onion on the meaning of the words Sara uses, asking Sara to confirm your understanding.
  4. Conclude with: “Thank you.” Add any commitment for action or request for the person to acknowledge or stop you the next time.

Seek the positive feedback that will help you continue to perform first. Then, focus on what could stop, change, or start. If you really embrace an interest in learning about the other person’s perceptions and ideas, you will gain tremendous value from their feedback. And, your ability to assimilate feedback will inspire you to be great giver!

## Try This!

Practice feedback in a real conversation with your son, daughter, spouse, parent or significant other.

1. Once you have a short list of your current data, try on several ways to assess or describe the situation.
2. Consider what you know about that person and his or her “lens.”
3. Conduct the conversation without stating your assessment, just pose data, your desired outcome—and ask questions.
4. Then, turn around and genuinely ask for feedback on a real situation for which you would like better information. Probe for data, ask about how they view the situation and your behaviors. See how much you can learn!