

A Leader Knows How to Give Feedback. True or False?



By Margaret Enloe, JD, PCC.

True or false: A Leader Knows How to Give Feedback. The answer is often... false. Yet, giving and seeking good feedback is a critical skill throughout one's career, especially for a leader who wants to get the best out of themselves and their team.

Feedback goes back to prehistoric times. Hunter gatherers relied on it to ward off danger, starvation and death. Animals all know how to communicate and effectively give feedback. In the wonderful book, *Sapiens, A Brief History of Humankind*, we're reminded that "...even insects, such as bees and ants, know how to inform one another of the whereabouts of food." (*Id.* at p. 22).

Humans can produce many more distinct sounds than animals. As the author of *Sapiens*, points out, "...we can connect a limited number of sounds and signs to produce an infinite number of sentences, each with a distinct meaning." But, does this translate into people giving good feedback. Absolutely not!

So, what **problems** do leaders often face giving and receiving feedback:

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1. Here are some tips to making feedback a worthwhile and positive experience:

A natural instinct to avoid conflict.

Giving and seeking out useful feedback often means having difficult conversations. But, people often shy away from this. Two books, *Crucial Conversations, Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* and *Conversational Intelligence*, are all about addressing our natural instinct to avoid conflict and why and how to engage in crucial conversations.

Too busy, too frustrated.

We know we should give someone feedback, but it can wait! We know we should ask for feedback, but it can wait!

Wanting "all" the facts.

Having the facts is an important part of good feedback. But, if you're prone to procrastination, an easy out is "I need to get all the facts."

Emotions.

Let's face it: obtaining and delivering feedback can be challenging because people often encounter unexpected emotional reactions. Many leaders experience a person crying when delivering feedback; it can derail the process and be uncomfortable. Someone who is more prone to tears upon hearing feedback, constructive or otherwise, will shy away from it, especially in a work environment.

People dislike uncertainty.

Uncertainty causes fear and anxiety. In *The Catalyst*, the author points out that uncertainty is even worse than certain negative outcomes. "Getting fired isn't fun, but wondering if you're about to be fired is worse still." Giving and receiving feedback creates an environment of uncertainty for both parties and, uncertainty often halts decision-making entirely.

The list of what makes it difficult to give good feedback is long. Fortunately, the consequences of giving poor feedback don't result in death or starvation. But, it can lead to isolation, recrimination, embarrassment, anger, resentment, not to mention low morale and loss of productivity.

Here are some tips to making feedback a worthwhile and positive experience:

1. **Do it in real time.** Semi-annual or annual performance reviews are nice but can't take the place of prompt, on-the-spot, feedback about something that didn't go well or something that did.
2. **Get enough facts so you can provide a context** of what happened, with specifics. Generalizations, such as "you never" or "you always" work against you.
3. **Focus more on the positives.** If someone did something you like, let them know. Humans are hardwired with a negativity bias: we feel the sting of a rebuke more powerfully than the joy of praise. It's important to overcome that with "I love how you handled this" type of comments.
4. **Listening is key** as much as engaging in a discussion. As a leader, remember that you don't know or have the solution for everything. Don't let familiarity, power or position blind you.
5. **Be a good role model.** A leader might have to make some tough decisions and not everyone will be happy. But, she might be admired, respected, or even trusted. Feedback from such a leader will be heard and make a difference. A leader who is impatient, cynical, opinionated, late for meetings, breaks commitments, fails to follow-up as promised and talks behind others' backs won't be liked, let alone admired, respected or trusted. If and when they provide feedback, it likely will be ineffective.

6. **Ask early for genuine feedback.** The higher you rise in the ranks, the harder it is to get honest feedback. People working for you want to please you and therefore don't provide insights that could help you and your organization. In a *New York Times* article, "**Leadership Means Learning to Look Behind the Mask,**" the author thoughtfully talks about the difficulties she had getting good feedback. It wasn't until she announced her retirement that people felt comfortable giving her their honest assessments. "If I had known how much I would benefit from asking for genuine feedback, I would have done it much earlier."

While giving and receiving good feedback is everyone's responsibility, it is increasingly so with the leaders. **Executive coaches** can have a very helpful impact on decoupling the power imbalance and facilitating leaders in both giving and getting good feedback.

For more about giving and receiving feedback and developing your leadership skills, **schedule a consultation with Margaret.**

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