## Giving feedback —

Constructive feedback is indispensable to productive collaboration. Most people find positive feedback easy to give and easy to receive. But when the response highlights a need to improve, it is harder to say and much harder to hear. Feedback given skillfully is a very specific kind of communication. Skillful feedback focuses on speaking privately to share the impact of the other person's behavior or work in an effort to help that person become more effective. Feedback is most useful when it is clear, credible, and actionable. Following the guidelines below will help you achieve that goal, especially when using our protocols.

**Give it with care.** To be useful, feedback requires the giver to want to help the person receiving, not evaluate, harm, or insult them.

**Let the recipient invite it.** Feedback is most effective when the receiver has invited the comments and signals their readiness to hear authentic feedback.

**Be specific.** Good feedback deals with particular incidents or behavior. Making vague statements is of little value. The most helpful feedback is concrete and focused on an area of interest specified by the receiver.

**Include feelings.** Effective feedback requires more than a simple statement of observed behaviors. It is often important to express your feelings about the event or activity so that the receiver can judge the full impact of the behavior being discussed. For example, you might say, "When you arrive late to meetings, I feel angry and frustrated because ..." Also, reflecting feelings back to the presenter will let them know they are being understood. "I imagine you are irritated by these details because of all the hard work you've put into the process. These details are needed because they allow us to ..."

**Avoid evaluative judgments.** The most useful feedback describes behaviors without value labels such as "irresponsible," "unprofessional," or even "good" and "bad." If the recipient asks you to make a judgment, be sure to state clearly that this is your opinion.

**Speak for yourself.** When giving feedback, be sure to discuss only things you have witnessed. Do not refer to absent or anonymous people (Do not say, "A lot of people didn't like it...").

**Pick an appropriate time and place.** Feedback is best given at a time and in a place that make it easy for the receiver to hear it, e.g., away from other people and distractions. It should also be given promptly after the event being discussed so the event remains fresh in the mind.

**Make the feedback readily actionable.** To be most useful, feedback should concern behavior that can be changed by the receiver. Feedback concerning matters outside the control of the receiver is not useful and often causes resentment.

## How to give feedback within protocols:

**Skillful feedback is precise, actionable, and neutral enough not to sound like harsh judgment.** The Feedback Nightmares activity is a useful way to begin generating a list of feedback do's and don'ts, building a common understanding and language around productive and counterproductive feedback.

**Know that, out of all the feedback offered, a presenter only accepts the feedback that they think will be helpful.** Everyone should assume that most of the cool feedback (suggestions) offered will be rejected for one of two reasons—the presenter has already tried it and it didn't work or they know it won't work in

their particular situation. In any protocol requesting feedback, at best, assume that only a small percentage of what is said may be useful. This serves two purposes: 1. The presenter doesn't need to feel defensive when choosing ideas to try, and 2. The group won't worry about "wasting" time by offering ideas that the presenter doesn't use. That said, a transparent sharing of what the presenter does find useful makes everyone feel that they have created a successful session even if an individual's ideas weren't mentioned!

**Careful wording of cool feedback is essential.** To avoid defensiveness, anger, and rejection, we urge cool feedback to be phrased using "wondering" language. For example, "I wonder if students created checklists with deadlines for tasks, if that might help them get the entire project completed on time." Cool feedback couched in "I wonders" has a profound effect on both the person receiving feedback and the people offering it. "Wondering" sounds curious rather than harsh or judgmental, and thus avoids raising defenses or hackles. If someone is curious whether an idea might work, that curiosity holds space for the presenter to wonder along with them, or to allow the spoken idea to spark another one internally. "Wondering" allows a presenter to leave a feedback session without feeling as if their work is covered with red ink. From the perspective of a person offering feedback, "I wonder" language engages the curious, creative part of their brains, allowing them to generate more "wonderings." In contrast, saying "I think they should ..." or "It would be more helpful if ..." tricks the speaker's brain into believing that there is only one answer (often the one that their brain first provided). Curious wondering avoids the pressure to come up with the single "correct" answer, or to defend or argue against the first ideas offered. Instead, curiosity allows fresher, more collaborative and innovative suggestions to arise after the first, noisy "right answers."

## Receiving Feedback —

**Come to a session ready to receive.** Try not to arrive feeling especially hungry, angry, or exhausted.

**Breathe.** This may seem overly simple, but remembering to breathe consciously and slowly can make a big difference. Our bodies are conditioned to react to stressful situations as if they were physical assaults, resulting in tense muscles, shallow and rapid breathing, etc. Taking slow, deep breaths will help your body to relax and your brain to focus.

**Specify what you want feedback around, often through use of a focusing question.** The more specific you can be about the feedback you desire, the more likely you will receive it, and will be able to act upon it. For example, in an observation protocol, if you want to know how students reacted to an assignment, ask, "What did the students do after I finished answering their questions?" rather than, "How did it go?"

**Listen carefully.** Don't interrupt or discourage the person giving feedback. Don't defend yourself ("It wasn't my fault...") and don't justify ("I only did that because...").

**Clarify your understanding of the feedback.** Feedback must be clearly understood in order for it to be helpful. Ask for specific examples, such as, "Can you describe what I do or say that seems to discourage some students from asking questions?"

**Summarize your understanding of the feedback.** Paraphrase the message in your own words to be sure you have heard and understood what was said.

**Take time to sort out what you heard.** You may need time to reflect on your thoughts and feelings about what was said, or to check with others before responding. This is normal, but should not be used as an excuse to avoid the issue. Depending on the perspective and knowledge of the person giving you feedback, it's not always appropriate for you to change things to meet their request. However, for your own best results, you should carefully review the feedback you're given before deciding whether to use it.

**Check out possible responses with the person who gave you feedback.** A good way to pre-test an alternative approach to a situation that has caused problems for you in the past is to ask the person who gave the feedback if they think it will be more effective. That provides a first screening, and makes the feedback-giver feel heard.