Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback

By Raafat Kamal

How can we help people learn, develop and change in ways to maximise their potential and help them grow professionally and personally? How can we achieve better results for our organisations and churches? One of the key answers is giving and receiving constructive feedback.

For most people, the word feedback seems to have a negative connotation and is not considered fun. It is a process that can be intimidating and stressful. But feedback does not have to be a judgemental exercise or an attack against one’s character. Rather, feedback is meant as an objective communication about behaviour and consequences – affirmation of a job well done or a suggestion on how to improve. If feedback is approached with the intention of making improvements, creating better situations and reinforcing good interpersonal relationships, it offers positive input with beneficial impact.

WE ALL NEED FEEDBACK. It is a necessary part of job performance and an effective way to grow. Therefore, building our abilities at giving feedback and opening ourselves to receiving feedback from others are crucial success factors to achieving effectual change and meaningful leadership.

Good and Bad Feedback

There are clear differences between good and bad feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good feedback</th>
<th>Bad feedback</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bad feedback</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1) Highlight positives</td>
<td>1) Ignore positives, is a witch-hunt or a blame-placing exercise</td>
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<td>2) Highlight challenges using specific facts and examples</td>
<td>2) Provide general comments using words like “all”, “never”, “always”</td>
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<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
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<td>3) Is a two-way street</td>
<td>3) Is one-sided – dominated by one party</td>
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<td>4) Focus on behaviour that can be repeated (positive) or changed</td>
<td>4) Focus on the person’s traits</td>
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<td>5) Open for listening to ideas</td>
<td>5) No opportunity for expressing alternative views</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Process</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td>6) Is conducted in an environment befitting the goal</td>
<td>6) Is hostile, personal, defensive</td>
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<td>7) Is not a surprise (if there is a big problem, it must be discussed beforehand)</td>
<td>7) Contain information which is completely unexpected</td>
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Ten Tips for Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback

Establish an ongoing receptive feedback environment through creating a positive tone, feel and listening culture. For feedback to be accepted, the recipient has to view the giver of feedback as reliable and as having good intentions. Introduce a culture of ongoing feedback rather than deferring issues until the performance review. Apply a well-known rule – “praise in public and criticise in private”.

Demonstrate by example an ongoing behaviour you wish to see. Do not ask for something from others that you are not prepared to do yourself; lead by example.

Preparation – for formal feedback sessions, put thought and time in preparing for the feedback process. Be balanced, objective and collect constructive examples to illustrate your points. Plan how you will state the problem – if there is one.

Timing – giving feedback right away after an incident or behaviour can be useful because the incident is fresh in everyone’s minds. However, there is a danger of reacting too quickly to a situation before grasping all the facts or while the people’s feelings may still be too “raw”. If you are emotional about a situation involving the recipient of your feedback, take a “time-out.” This is preferable than giving or receiving feedback when one of you is in a “bad mood”.

Choose your words carefully as this will have a great impact on the recipient. Depending on the choice of words, the feedback giver can establish a harmonious feedback environment or a hostile one. Choose your feedback phrases with focus on actions that can be repeated (positive) or needs to be changed, not the person.

Start your feedback by acknowledging the positive contributions that the recipient has made to the organisation and share meaningful specific examples with focus on outcomes, not activities. Make the recipient feel comfortable and appreciated.

Stop talking and start listening – hear the recipient’s perspective (words and body language) and focus on the recipient’s message rather than on your own response. Paraphrase the recipient’s message by restating them in different words and if you have not understood them, ask more questions until both of you are sure what the issue is all about. If you feel attacked, resist leaping to your own defence until you have had a chance to reflect on and thoroughly process the feedback. Deal with your emotions at a later time. Listen to what the other person is saying and avoid interrupting or jumping to conclusions. Remember that all perceptions are “real”, especially to the ones that own them;

Be specific and talk about the facts. Discuss what happened, not how you feel about what happened. Stay objective, factual and descriptive. Avoid generalisation and focus on personality traits. Direct the constructive feedback process to the impact of unwanted behaviours on the recipient, organisation and the rest of the staff and affirm where possible wanted behaviours by exploring ways to repeat them and develop further.

Work towards a solution by collaborating to come up with constructive ideas for improvement. Agree on an action plan with specific targets, deadlines and persons responsible that can be measured and monitored at specified intervals. This enhances ownership, encourages growth personally and organisationally and increases commitment to achieve excellence.

Be aware that there are times when feedback giving and receiving (formal and informal) no longer works. You agree to targets and action plans, but the person keeps behaving in the same challenging manner. There may be many possible reasons for the lack of progress – he/she does not care, does not understand the need for change, disagree with your approach, questions your motives and integrity, and so on.

In such a situation, do not let your own frustration show. Instead, seek advice from colleagues and human resource experts and try another formal feedback session but this time include other people – always documenting carefully statements, agreements, behaviors and misbehaves.

Recommended Reading

- Feedback that works: How to Build and Deliver Your Message, Sloan R Weitzel, 2005
- The Power of Feedback, Joseph R Folkman, 2006

TED Diary—May 2010

- 01-02 Church Growth Seminar—Aberdeen, Scotland
- 01-02 Pathfinder Camp—Växjö, Sweden
- 01-03 ADRA Ireland Consultations—Dublin, Ireland
- 01-03 Worship & Music Conference—Helsinki, Finland
- 09-11 TED Spring Meetings with leaders—St Albans, UK
- 13-16 Theological Consultation—Dunblane, UK
- 14-18 LC Web Pastors Training—Rogaska, Slovenia
- 14-21 Leadership Training—Beirut, Lebanon
- 14-23 Training in running Anti-smoking & Community Health programmes—Kaunas, Lithuania
- 17-21 ADRA Poland Consultations—Warsaw, Poland
- 18 Further Education for Pastors—Stockholm, Sweden
- 22 LIFE development weekend—St Albans, UK
- 28-31 Welsh Mission Family Camp—Wales
To Think About...

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Issues observed in the Field: From the TED President

Per Winblad says in his book The Wisdom of Leadership (see LDN 2009: November):

‘Everybody needs encouragement and attention. By encouraging another person with a kind word, a helpful suggestion, or an expression of admiration, we show our belief in that person, and we plant the seeds of hope. Where a seed of hope has been planted, self-confidence and belief in the future will grow and reap progress and enjoyment.’ (p. 81).

This is a wonderful statement on practical Christian leadership.

The greatest danger in this area is using what we think is ‘encouragement’ as a means of manipulation. We want to obtain the favour of a person, so we give him praise. We want a person to do what we want, so we give him compliments to stimulate him in the direction we prefer. We receive encouragement from somebody and feel obliged to return it but it doesn’t come from our sincere heart, for what drives us is to avoid looking bad in the other’s eyes. Encouragement has nothing to do with flattery, manipulation, or hypocrisy.

Genuine encouragement comes from genuine respect for and genuine care about the other person which we call Christian love. It also requires complete honesty and a disengagement from my own private objectives. It requires that unselfish love which communion with Christ generates in us.

Based on this recognition, here is some practical advice:

• Be an encourager – you will generate encouraging responses back to you and others, which begins a process towards a culture of encouragement.

• Encourage all – regardless of their performance. Remember that encouragement is a human need and that we all need it.

• Encourage the best performers – they seem confident and are successful, but they need encouragement to continue growing and feel valued.

• Encourage the weak performers – their results may not give much ground for encouragement, but they will perform their best if you encourage them.

• Encourage in honesty and truth – if you repeat standard phrases with no relationship to reality, your encouragement will be received as flattery without any positive effect.

• Encourage in a balanced way – there is always something positive in what people do, so focus on that while dealing in empathy with areas where improvement is required.

• Encourage without being patronising – when you encourage you communicate at the same level of human brotherhood.

• Encourage others because of God’s encouragement to you in Jesus Christ (Fil. 2:1).

• Encourage others without looking to your own interests, but to the interests of others (Fil. 2:4).

Bertil Wiklander

To Read, Then Lead

But Zerubbabel and Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the fathers’ houses of Israel said to them, “You may do nothing with us to build a house for our God; but we alone will build to the Lord God of Israel, and King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us.” Ezra 4,3.

Leaders must practice discernment. Relationships can get messy; people often harbour personal agendas and attempt to mask their true motives or to make them sound more noble than they really are.

Such was the case when a group of outsiders approached Zerubbabel and offered to help. “Let us build with you, for we seek your God as you do; and we have sacrificed to Him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here,” (Ezra 4,2). Zerubbabel, however, quickly recognised these folks had really arrived only to discourage the builders. His relational discernment kept these negative influences from infiltrating the flock.

Leaders must read the people, then lead the people. They must understand the timing, the people, the situation, and the priorities, then act accordingly. Their action depends upon how they read these factors. Discernment always precedes decision. Analysis always precedes action.

The Maxwell Leadership Bible

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