

GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Good communication is a skill that can be developed, like other skills, by practicing it and getting the opinions of others on how well you have performed. As you know, a large part of 15.279 is practicing oral and written communication, and then receiving feedback on your efforts. The feedback you receive will tell you what you are doing that is effective, as well as what you can do to strengthen your performance.

The way in which feedback is given and received contributes to the learning process. Feedback that is vague, judgmental, ill timed, or unusable is not as valuable as feedback that is specific, descriptive, timely, and practical. Similarly, although being criticized is often not pleasant, being open to well-intentioned, well-crafted feedback can only further professional development.

What follows, then, is a series of suggestions for how to give and receive feedback.

Giving Feedback

When giving feedback, try to:

- *Be specific rather than general.* The more concrete the feedback is, the more useful it will be to the person receiving it. Thus, rather than saying, “Mike sometimes you weren't clear in your explanations . . .,” tell Mike exactly where he was vague and describe why you had trouble understanding him.

Similarly, it's nice but not very helpful to say, “Joan, I thought you did an excellent job.” Rather, list the specific things that Joan did well. For example, she might have created a strong introduction for a presentation, used transitions advantageously in a written document, or communicated interest and enthusiasm. Tell her how these techniques contributed to the success of her work.

- *Be descriptive, not evaluative.* Focus on the effect the letter, memo, presentation, etc. had on you, rather than on how good or bad you perceive it to be. For example, saying, “It's wrong to use indirect structure,” is a generalization that may or may not be true in all cases. However, saying “I had trouble understanding the point of this memo until the very end,” can help the person realize that other readers may have the same reaction.

Remember, too, that some of your responses will come from your own per-

ceptions (for example, in some cultures using direct structure is considered brusque if not rude.) Thus it's good practice to begin most feedback with, "In my opinion . . ." or, "In my experience . . ."

- *Describe something the person can act upon.* Commenting on the vocal quality of someone whose voice is naturally high pitched is only likely to discourage him/her. However, if the person's voice had a squeaky quality to it because he/she was nervous, you might say, "Barbara, you might want to breath more deeply to relax yourself, and that will help lower the pitch of your voice as well."
- *Chose one or two things the person can concentrate on.* People can usually act on only a few pieces of feedback at any one time. If they are overwhelmed with too many suggestions, they are likely to become frustrated. When giving feedback, call attention to those areas that need the most improvement.
- *Avoid inferences about motives, intentions or feelings.* To say, "You don't seem very enthusiastic about this presentation" is to imply something about the person her/himself. A better comment might be, "Varying your rate and volume of speaking would give you a more animated style."

Receiving Feedback

When you receive feedback, try to:

- *Be open to what you are hearing.* Being told that you need to improve yourself is not always easy, but, as we have pointed out, it's an important part of the learning process. Although you might feel hurt in response to criticism, try not to let those feelings deter you from using the feedback to your best advantage.
- *If possible, take notes.* If you can, take notes as you are hearing the other people's comments. Then you will have a record to refer to, and you might discover that the comments you thought were the most harsh at the time they were being said were actually the most insightful and useful.
- *Ask for specific examples , if you need to.* If the critique you are receiving is vague or unfocused, ask the person to give you several specific examples of the point he/she is trying to make.
- *Judge the feedback by the person who is giving it.* You don't have to agree with every comment. Think about the person's credibility when assessing the

validity of her/his statements. Ask other people if they agree with the person's critique.

In sum, be practical, tactful, and upbeat when giving and receiving feedback--you'll see what wonders that can do!

Gambits for Giving Constructive Feedback

Making Suggestions/Giving Advice

May I make a suggestion?

Don't you think?

Wouldn't you say? (agree? think?)

Wouldn't it be better if?

Why don't you try to?

You might want to consider . . .

Are you sure?

Let's . . .

Perhaps we could . . .

Why not?

How about?

I suggest

Asking for Suggestions/Advice

Do you have any suggestions?

What do you think?

What would you do?

What should I do?

Accepting and Rejecting Suggestions/Advice

That's a good point/idea/approach.

Thanks for reminding me.

Why don't we try that?

I want to think about that.

That's a good idea, but . . .

I hadn't thought about that.

Yes, but don't forget . . .

Yes, but consider . . .

Possibly, but . . .

The problem is . . .