

# FEEDBACK THEORY

## DEFINITION

As responsible members of groups, people intend to behave in ways that help the group to move toward accomplishing its task, while at the same time maintaining its membership, that is, keeping any member from being lost overboard. Actually, even one's best-intended behaviour may hinder rather than help and sometimes it is even destructive.

As a group develops, some of the members find themselves wanting to get the reactions of other members of the group to their behaviour during the sessions. Others, to a greater or lesser degree, have fears about this.

When people tell how another's behaviour is affecting them, what they are communicating is feedback. The technical term comes originally from the field of automation. (For example, the thermostat gives feedback to a furnace on how well the furnace is heating the thermostat.) It's a term that applies equally well to what goes on in groups.

## CATEGORIES

Feed back may emerge in a number of ways.

*Conscious*: nodding assent; or *unconscious*: falling asleep

*Spontaneous*: "Thanks a lot"; or *solicited*: "Yes, it did help"

*Verbal*: "no"; or *nonverbal*: leaving the room

*Formal*: evaluation form; or *informal*: hand-clapping

## EFFECTS

Feed back can have the following helpful effects:

### **Reinforces**

Feedback may confirm behaviour by encouraging its repetition. "You really helped then when you clarified that."

### **Corrects**

Feedback may help bring behaviour in line with intention. "It would have helped me more if you had stood up to talk."

### **Identifies**

Feedback may help identify persons and their relationship. "Joe, I thought we were enemies, but we're not, are we?"

# PRINCIPLES OF GIVING FEEDBACK

## FEEDBACK IS BEST WHEN...

... **IT IS DESCRIPTIVE**, rather than judgmental. By describing one's own reaction, it leaves the individual free to use it or not to use it as s/he sees fit. By avoiding judgmental language, it reduces the need for the individual to react defensively.

... **IT IS SPECIFIC**, rather than general. To be told "you did a great job" is too general to be useful. Say, for example, "The way you organized the agenda really helped us to make decisions."

... **IT IS APPROPRIATE**, by taking into account the needs of both the receiver and giver of feedback. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only the needs of the one who gives the feedback and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. It needs to be tailored to the situation, to be considerate of the circumstances of the receiver, and to be given supportively.

... **IT IS USEABLE**, rather than out of reach. Feedback needs to be directed toward behaviour which the receiver can do something about. Frustration is only increased when a person is reminded of some short-coming over which s/he has no control.

... **IT IS WELL-TIMED**. In general, feedback is most effective when it is given at the earliest opportunity after the action or behaviour has been observed. Timing also includes a sensitivity to the person's readiness to hear it and to surrounding circumstances. For difficult feedback, ensuring that there is support available may be important.

... **IT IS CLEAR AND HONEST**. Feedback is not helpful when it is given so carefully and cautiously that the point is lost. Giving it straight out is the best policy. That way, the receiver does not need to second-guess what is being said and why it is being said. One way of checking to ensure that the communication has been clear is to ask the receiver to rephrase it to see if the feedback received corresponds to what the sender had in mind.

... **IT IS REQUESTED**, rather than imposed. Feedback is most useful when the receiver formulates a specific question or solicits a response. Of course, through the very act of placing oneself in a learning situation the receiver indicates that feedback is both essential and welcome.

... **IT REPRESENTS A COMMITMENT TO GROWTH**. Feedback is best when it is offered out of a commitment to the person. The intention of feedback is to help the other learn and grow. This means that the giver of feedback needs to be prepared to relate on an ongoing basis and offer further comments to indicate improvement over time.

# GIVING FEEDBACK

## A Model for Giving Feedback

A frequent error in giving feedback is to be too general. Helpful positive feedback needs to be clear and concise.

### 1) Introduce the Conversation

e.g. "I would like to give you some positive feedback about the children's time you led in last week's service. Is now a good time for that?"

### 2) Describe the Behaviour and Context

"I noticed that you had the children's attention throughout. Your voice was inviting and animated without being patronizing or overly dramatic. Your sincerity and affection for the children were evident in the way you offered them eye contact and took their questions seriously. And you were able to be firm but kind when you asked the young boy not to bang his feet because it made it hard to hear and it was distracting."

### 3) Share Impact of the Behaviour

"I can relax when you offer leadership for the children's time. I know that you are confident and can handle the spontaneity of the children without being flustered or overwhelmed. I am deeply grateful that you treat them respectfully and listen to them. I think that is a great model for all of us who take our turn doing the children's time."

## Supportive Climates

All of us need positive feedback. In the best case scenarios, the field placement setting will establish supportive climates. A supportive climate is characterized by:

1) Feedback is descriptive not evaluative or judgemental. Events are described in objective terms.

2) Feedback is not an issue of control or imposing of one's own view but focuses on the problematic behaviour not on the person.

3) Feedback tends to be spontaneously expressed in a straight forward, honest fashion. People are open about their viewpoints and opinions and don't have hidden agendas or secretive motives.

4) Feedback is respectfully offered with empathetic attention to the other person's feelings, problems and value system. The other person's worth is affirmed.

5) Feedback is not a matter of "pulling rank" and is not offered in a competitive atmosphere which sets up comparisons in ability and status.

6) Feedback is tentative in nature. It is not overly certain of its correctness or its point of view.

## **Preparation for Giving Feedback**

Before giving feedback, especially when it is critical or difficult, it is crucial to do some reflection in preparation.

- 1) Determine the best time and place
- 2) Identify the readiness of the person to receive feedback
  - was the feedback requested explicitly or implicitly?
  - was the feedback not requested?
- 3) Reflect on your motivation
  - am I interested in the other person's well-being? growth? future?
  - am I angry? seeking revenge? wanting my own way?
- 4) Reflect on the power dynamic of the situation
  - in what ways is the other person vulnerable?
  - in what ways do they have power over me?
- 5) Prepare yourself to match the tone, style and language of the other person
  - develop strategies so that the other person can hear and understand your feedback
- 6) Identify how you will introduce the conversation
  - "I want to give you feedback about ..."
  - "What I have noticed is..."
  - "I would like to share my observations about last week's worship..."
- 7) Describe the behaviour without judgement
- 8) Practise
  - if necessary, write out what you will say face to face
  - rehearse by yourself or with a trusted colleague

# RECEIVING FEEDBACK

There are helpful and less than helpful ways to respond to feedback. The steps described below provide some appropriate guidelines for receiving feedback with maturity and grace.

## A Suggested Process

### 1) Check Out the Comments

- repeat back the feedback and your understanding of the problematic behaviour

### 2) Ask Clarifying Questions

- make sure that you have understood to the satisfaction of the one who offered the feedback

### 3) Do Self Talk

- tell yourself that you can handle criticism
- wonder about the situation and practise being curious
- prompt yourself to listen and not interrupt

### 4) Thank the Person

- demonstrate appreciation for the commitment to relationship and learning
- remind yourself that this is likely a stressful situation for the other person too; it may have taken considerable courage to offer feedback

### 5) Identify Next Steps (if any)

- promise to think about the feedback
- be clear about what is being requested of you
- brainstorm alternative approaches or behaviours
- consider making appropriate changes

## Do not...

- over-explain

- clarify in a sentence or two but learn to stop

- use this as an opportunity to give your own feedback

- it may become escalating retaliation

- become silent or shut down

- which may be perceived as petulance or resistance

- blame others

- accept your responsibility

- make excuses

- it only appears defensive and as if you are not taking the feedback seriously