

# Do You Know How to Give Constructive Feedback... So It's Actually Constructive?

By David Lee

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*Reprinted from The Employment Times · October 1, 2007*

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Do you know how to give feedback such that the other person:

1. Wants to hear it?
2. Can understand it and act on it?
3. Doesn't get defensive?
4. Respects your opinion?

## **It Can Be THE Difference Between...**

Knowing how to give corrective feedback constructively can be the difference between having a motivated, "I want to do my best" team and employees who feel misunderstood, unappreciated, and unmotivated.

Even the smartest managers mess this up.

I had a personal experience being on the receiving end of "constructive" feedback several years ago which reminded me of how much attention needs to go into this, if you want to do it right.

Here's what happened...

A friend and colleague of mine asked if I could assist in a project which involved interviewing a large number of employees. After the interviewing stage of the project, her job was to read and analyze the transcripts.

## **At First...Clear, Precise Positive Feedback!**

A few weeks after I did my part of the project – interviewing employees – she called me to say she really liked how I interviewed. More specifically, she said she noticed in reading the transcripts that I didn't let superficial answers go unexplored and that I was able to elicit deeper, more insightful responses from the interviewees, without being overly challenging. She was very enthusiastic with her praise.

I was thrilled to hear this since I take my work seriously and have tremendous respect for this friend and colleague. She possess some serious intellectual horsepower and isn't easily impressed.

## **But Then Later...Vague, Detail-Free Feedback**

Then, another month or two went by and I received another call. She was wrapping up her analysis and said, almost in passing, that she noticed that the length of my transcripts seemed to be shorter than the other interviewer's and thought it indicated I hadn't asked enough probing, follow-up questions (we had a prescribed list of questions to ask).

As I reflected on her comment, I recalled that I had quite a few interviewees who weren't able to answer a number of the questions because they were from another department and so weren't privy to the issues these questions focused on. With these people, I remembered the interviews were considerably shorter than those conducted with employees who worked in the department in question.

## **Wait A Minute... This Isn't Useful!**

I explained this and asked her if she noticed the difference in interview length between the two groups. She hadn't looked for that, she replied, so she didn't notice. When I heard this, it made me question the veracity of her observation and how discerning she had been.

In an effort to move the conversation in a productive direction – i.e. what to do from this point forward -- she recommended that I ask more follow-up questions in future interviews.

## **Now I'm Confused**

I was perplexed. She had originally said she especially liked the fact that I did ask probing follow-up questions. Now she's saying I hadn't been doing that and needed to do so in the future?

In an attempt to clarify why she had this new interpretation, I asked if she saw examples in the transcript where I could have asked follow-up questions... or if this assessment was simply because of the shorter transcripts indicating shorter interviews. She said it was the latter.

This answer made me question further the veracity of her judgment. What it sounded like to me, absent any actual examples, was she hadn't taken into consideration how many people I interviewed that simply were out of the loop regarding the issues we were exploring and had lumped those interviews with the longer, in depth ones. I also didn't know how many "out of the loop" people the other interviewers had met with, so we couldn't make any comparisons that way.

## **What Happens When Managers Mishandle This Moment of Truth**

Even while I was in the midst of this interchange, I was standing back and observing my response and thinking how this reflects one of the most critical "managerial moments of truth" – giving employees corrective feedback. As I monitored my feelings and thoughts, I noted that my response to her handling of this was to:

1. **Question her judgment.** - It seemed to me that she hadn't thought through the logic behind her assessment. It didn't sound grounded in actual tangible evidence, just a vague generalization. The factors I brought up hadn't been considered and she had nothing concrete to offer to support her assessment. To me, it demonstrated "fuzzy thinking."
2. **Feel unfairly criticized.** - Her current assessment was in direct contradiction to the feedback she gave me during the time she was actively reviewing the transcripts, and therefore when she had a clearer picture of my interviewing style. It also didn't feel fair given how, based on the factors described above, it seemed like she was basing it on poorly thought out reasons.

### **Can We Turn This Around and Make It Into a Good Thing?**

Hoping to get something concrete to work with and perhaps turn things around, I asked again if she would be able to think of some examples, so I could make sure I understood what she was looking for. She said she couldn't remember any.

"Well, this is no help" I thought.

### **The Awkward Bind Employees Find Themselves In When They Disagree With The Feedback**

While part of me wanted to challenge the logic behind her feedback, I knew it would only make me sound defensive and un-teachable. This was the first time we had worked together and I didn't want to come across as unwilling to take feedback. Also, as a former supervisor, I think few things are more frustrating to a supervisor than trying to coach someone who is defensive and un-teachable.

So, I switched gears and focused on how to make this useful for the future. I asked her if, when she had a minute, she would be able to look over one of the shorter transcripts and see where I might have asked follow-up questions, so I can make sure I know what she's looking for in the future. She said she would.

### **The Fall-out When "Constructive" Feedback Isn't Constructive**

When we hung up, I felt frustrated because the feedback was not useful – there was nothing specific to work with – and it didn't seem fair, for the reasons stated above. I also found myself questioning her judgment. While I still held her in high regard, in this small area, she had lost some credibility in my eyes. Because of my overall high regard for her, this incident had a minor negative effect. If this wasn't the case though, this incident would have made me seriously question her critical thinking abilities and judgment. It would have also increased the odds of me taking her future feedback with a grain of salt.

As I reflected on my response, a couple of observations came to mind. My desire to not appear defensive or unwilling to hear feedback had made me unwilling to vigorously challenge her logic.

### **As The Receiver of the Feedback, What Can WE Do?**

If I had it to do over again, I might have done what's called Name the Game. This is where you speak openly about the dynamic that is going on in the conversation. An example of Naming the Game in this situation would be:

"To be honest, I have to admit I'm having a hard time working with this feedback, because there are a couple of things going on that make me question it's accuracy, but I don't want to come across as defensive or unwilling to receive feedback... So there's part of me that's reluctant to say anything... but I know that wouldn't do either of us any good... Since we both want me to do the best possible job for you... do you mind if I share with you what I find confusing about what I'm hearing?"

By Naming the Game and disclosing what's going on inside of me, I could have opened the door to us exploring her rationale and thought process. Because of our relationship and her self-confidence, I believe she would have been comfortable doing that. If she was insecure or we had a history of tension, she might have gotten defensive and pushed to shut down the conversation. I mention this because the relationship between you and the other person and your history together influences how open and direct you can be in your quest for clarity.

I would then explain my concerns and ask her about her take on my points. I would then reiterate that I want to do the best job possible and to do so, want to do my part to get actionable feedback.

### **Think of Times You've Been Given Feedback That You Thought Was Unfair or Inaccurate**

Reflect on a few of those experiences. I bet you can remember some that happened years ago. That's how strongly such experiences can affect us, and why it's so important to "get it right" when it comes to giving corrective feedback.

Think about how you thought and felt both during and after these situations, and what you thought about your boss as a result of them. As you do, consider the following observations from my experience and whether you can relate to them:

1. **Unclear Feedback Fosters a Sense of Helplessness and Hopelessness Because It Offers No Clues About How to Improve** – Since the whole idea of giving constructive feedback is performance improvement, giving vague, non-specific feedback defeats the whole purpose. How can we improve on something when we don't know: A) What specifically we did wrong, B) What specifically the "new and improved version" looks and sounds like?

Vague, ambiguous feedback doesn't give employees anything useful to work with. All they know is they failed, but they don't know what they need to do to

succeed. The resulting sense of helplessness makes unclear and nonspecific feedback incredibly demoralizing.

2. **Poorly thought through feedback diminishes a supervisor's credibility** - If a supervisor "wings it" when giving feedback; if they make judgments and assessments without thinking them through clearly, they run the risk of losing their employee's respect and trust. Haven't you found that to be true? When you can clearly see your boss didn't get all the facts or didn't think things through before sounding off, don't you find yourself doubting their judgment and perhaps even their competence? As one wise manager said to me "We need to realize that just as we're evaluating them, they're evaluating us. They're watching us to see if we know what we're doing."
3. **Inaccurate or ungrounded feedback leads to resentment** – When supervisors give poorly thought through feedback, they also run the risk of leaving the employee feeling unfairly criticized and therefore resentful. This might not seem to be a big problem for bosses from the old school philosophy of "they'll just have to get over it". It is, however, a big problem, because of the human desire for justice and for retribution.

It's a big problem because it crashes up against a universal human value – justice. This universal value, when violated, leads to another universal: the desire for retribution. Donald Brown, a famous anthropologist who studied human values and norms across cultures, found that every single culture he studied valued justice and demonstrated the desire for retribution (labeled negative reciprocity).

This doesn't mean unfair criticism will lead to employee sabotage, but it does mean that if employees feel unfairly criticized, they are less likely to feel as committed to their boss and their employer, less enthused about making a difference, and less interested in going the extra mile. In short, they become less engaged. Since, as Gallup's research has shown, only 26% of employees report being highly engaged, avoiding any source of disengagement would be wise for any supervisor.

Think of times you've felt you were treated unjustly and how that affected your level of enthusiasm and commitment. Think of how much it affected your level of engagement. Let those memories motivate you to do your homework before giving corrective feedback.

## **So Now What?**

Here are a few suggestions to get started:

1. Refine your feedback skills – take seminars, read books, get coaching. The time invested will pay back handsomely in terms of increased employee morale, motivation, and productivity.

2. Ask your staff for feedback on how you give feedback. Ask for specific examples. Ask them for suggestions on how you can make it more constructive.
3. Make sure when you do give feedback that you think it through clearly. Avoid fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants approaches.
4. Make sure you give examples. Describe what you saw and heard, rather than abstract judgments like “unprofessional” or “didn’t act like a team player.”
5. Don’t exaggerate to make a point. If the person has done something twice, don’t say “You’ve done this at least five or six times.”
6. When giving the person feedback, stop and ask them for their take on what you’re saying. This not only helps you get feedback on how the conversation is going... it helps make sure it IS a conversation, not a monologue.
7. Don’t use sarcastic humor to make a point (“Boy, that was helpful”, “I’m glad we can count on you, Pierre”, “Nice of you to show up”). Humor, when used judiciously – i.e. to help a person save face or lighten the mood – helps take away some of the sting that negative feedback can leave. But when used as a way to avoid directly addressing something, it leaves the person feeling mistreated and unsure of whether the comment was a “playful” dig that’s OK to ignore or a real concern they should take seriously.

**Note:** To reprint this in an association or corporate newsletter, please contact the author first at [David@HumanNatureAtWork.com](mailto:David@HumanNatureAtWork.com)

**About the Author:** David Lee is the founder and principal of [HumanNature@Work](http://HumanNature@Work.com). He is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. Mr. Lee is the author of *Managing Employee Stress and Safety*, as well as several dozen articles on organizational and individual performance that have been published in a number of trade journals in North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia.

Mr. Lee provides consulting, training, and executive coaching services that help organizations and their managers achieve the following results:

- Improve employee morale and productivity.
- Develop a Magnetic Employer Brand™ that leads to “employer of choice” status, cuts down on recruiting costs and turnover, and leads to a better talent pool to draw upon.
- Reduce the time, energy, and financial cost of employee relations problems by identifying organizational and managerial practices that prevent such problems from occurring, and helping managers develop the facilitation skills to quickly and effectively resolve such issues.
- Help employees respond effectively to change, so their energy is spent contributing to – rather than fighting – change initiatives.

- Create an environment and provide skills that enable sales and customer service professionals to maximize customer loyalty.

## Comments About David Lee's Work:

"David, not only did I find your presentation very clear on concepts and theories, but more importantly, your program includes practical suggestions and multiple workshop handouts that participants can take back to their workplaces to implement those concepts and theories in a practical way". - *Don Steig, HRH of Northern New England, ME*

"Whenever I attend a seminar, if I leave with 2 or 3 solid items to implement back at our office, I feel the day has been worthwhile. I left David Lee's half-day course with more than 20 solid, common-sense, no-cost items that I am eager to implement. And the best part is that it is clear that implementing them will have a measurable impact for our firm! This half-day course was an excellent use of time." - *Eric S. Wood, President, EnviroSense, Inc., NH*

"Thank you for doing such an outstanding job keynoting our conference. As you could tell by the response, participants loved both the content and the delivery of your presentation." - *Dr. Ian Gawler, Director, The Gawler Foundation, Victoria, Australia*

"David's presentation style is unparalleled! The substantive and timely content of his subject materials is immediately adaptable to the workplace making his seminars an invaluable aid to an employer seeking to be an "Employer of Choice." - *Lynn M. Lombard, VP, MMG Insurance Company, ME*

"I just wanted to thank you again for a magnificent presentation. I have been to many seminars, and this far exceeded any past experience. I walked away feeling energized, enthusiastic and empowered. I can hardly wait to apply the principles that we discussed today at work and beyond." - *Sybil L. Morin, Director of Administration, LifeShare, Inc., NH*

"I learned more in this seminar than in four others I took from (a well known national seminar company)."- *Jennifer Sgroi, Stonyfield Farm, NH*

"I can honestly say that your sessions were highlights for me at the conference. Since then I have perused your website and read many of the articles posted on there. Again, thank you and kudos to you for the great presentation!" - *Rob Huppée, Amica Mature Lifestyles Inc., British Columbia*

I want to say a big thank you for the wonderful job you did in your presentations during our Quality Leadership Conference. You are a talented individual; thank you for sharing your gifts with Fairview. You have touched our soul. - *Tom Hanson, Fairview Healthcare System, MN*

David Lee's seminar, *Constructive Conversations: How to Foster Honest, Open, Non-Defensive Dialogue About Difficult Issues*, was one of the most worthwhile training experiences that I have had in a long time. Geared towards more experienced practitioners, it presented a whole new way to look at challenging discussions we have with employees and really changed my approach and perspective. I am looking forward to returning to work and implementing the many ideas that came out of the course, and look forward to attending future seminars from HumanNature@Work. - *Cindy Joyce, Director of Human Resources, FundQuest, Boston, MA*