

# Do You Make These 19 Common Mistakes When Giving Constructive Feedback?

By David Lee

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*Originally published in The Employment Time · February 25, 2008*

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One of the most difficult "moments of truth" managers tell me they struggle with is giving constructive feedback—or at least feedback they hope will be perceived as constructive. They often avoid giving it, because they know it's going to be awkward and could possibly make matters worse.

## When Constructive Feedback Goes Bad

When a manager attempts to give constructive feedback, but does it ineffectively, the employee can end up:

- Feeling misunderstood—and therefore hurt and resentful.
- Feeling put down and disrespected.
- Believing all the good things they do aren't noticed or appreciated.
- Believing their boss doesn't know what he's talking about.
- Not knowing exactly what they're doing wrong or what they're boss wants, so they continue to make mistakes.
- Leaving the interaction less motivated, less interested in doing a great job, less interested in going the extra mile.
- Thus, knowing how to give constructive feedback so it's actually "constructive" should be on every manager's professional development to do list. Just as it's important to

know what to do, it's also important to know what NOT to do.

## Nineteen Constructive Feedback Mistakes To Avoid

1. **Sugar coating negative feedback.** - When you're afraid of hurting the other person's feelings or triggering a negative response, it's (unfortunately) natural to sugar coat negative feedback. The result? They can't decipher what you're trying to say or the seriousness of the matter.
2. **Caving in or backing down because the person is getting upset.** - While taking a time-out might be the best response when a person truly becomes unglued, revising your assessment downward or deciding "it's not worth it" are never appropriate responses.
3. **Avoiding the conversation until you've "had it up to here."** - When we wait until that point, and are now in a frustrated, take-no-prisoners state, not much good is going to come out of the conversation. If we're going for the throat, how could they not feel attacked and get defensive?
4. **Using an overly formal or forceful opening.** - Managers often do this as a way to let the person know they mean business and/or reduce the odds that the other person will "fight back". While a serious, all-business demeanor is appropriate for very serious matters and egregious mistakes, it's not necessary in many situations. Most people appreciate a more low key approach that

- communicates “We’re two adults here” instead of “You are about to be scolded by the principal” tone which tends to trigger defensiveness.
5. **“Controlling the airwaves”** – Some managers use this as a preemptive move to prevent the feedback receiver from being able to disagree or make excuses. By doing this, the manager ends up creating a monologue instead of a dialogue. Few things trigger resentment and resistance than being “talked at.”
  6. **Stating what you’re unhappy about without offering a clear picture of what you want.** - This leads to the receiver feeling unsure about what they need to do to succeed, which leaves them feeling impotent.
  7. **Plowing forward with an action plan without first getting agreement about the problem.** - Unless the person understands what you want, what the issue is, and why it’s important to change, they’re not interested in your action plan.
  8. **Giving positive feedback without specifics.** - (e.g. “You’re awesome”, “You do such a great job!”). This is especially counterproductive for people with personality styles that value data, precision, and detail. These people also tend to dislike flamboyant or emotional language. When they hear undefined and unspecified praise, they question the praise giver’s sincerity and knowledge about what they’re praising.
  9. **Mistaking valid reasons for excuses..** - Some bosses are so paranoid about being taken advantage of that they’re unable to recognize valid reasons and extenuating circumstances. To them, everything other than a “You’re right boss” agreement represents the employee trying to make excuses. When employees feel like their legitimate points are seen as excuses, they soon shut out the accuser and become resentful.
  10. **Waiting for the once a year performance review to give feedback.** - This is always a great way to spark confused “What are you talking about?” resentment-packed conversations. The key word in performance reviews is “review”. They’re not supposed to be a place to air late breaking news.
  11. **Using vague judgments without specific examples** – Without concrete, sensory-based language, concepts like “more of a team player”, “more service oriented”, “more helpful”, “more professional”, and “show more initiative” mean nothing. Labels without examples leave people feeling helpless about making changes because they don’t know what specifically you’re unhappy about or what you want.
  12. **Delivering a long warm-up preamble before giving the negative feedback.** - This just builds suspense for what they know is coming: the negative feedback. (“I really appreciate what a team player you are and I really love your attention to detail and I think you’re doing a great job with .... BUT...”).
  13. **Using blunt, provocative, or shaming language to make a point.** - “I would think that would be a no-brainer...” “That train has left the station, so let’s move on, huh?”, “I’m assuming we’re all grown-ups here.”, etc.
  14. **Pretending to agree and then disagreeing.** - “I can see why you feel that way, but...” This pattern is especially good at triggering defensiveness and shutting down when it’s delivered with a vocal intonation that rises to a crescendo just before the “but” part comes. There’s a difference between honestly acknowledging the other person’s viewpoint and just pretending to agree as

a way to soften them up for your opposing point of view. You can acknowledge you understand their perspective without agreeing with it.

15. **Winging it.** - Making an assessment or judgment without thinking through possible angles and getting all the facts. Few things spark resentment or diminished respect for the criticizer than feeling inaccurately—and therefore unfairly—criticized.
16. **Telling them what's going on inside their head.** – Few things trigger defensiveness more effectively than playing psychiatrist and telling someone we know what's going on inside of their head—"I know there's tension between you and Sarah because she got the Team Lead position you applied for, but...". If you have a good relationship with the other person, it's fine to ask them if your guess about what's going on is accurate; just don't imply you know what's going on inside their head (because you don't... unless you have special powers).
17. **Using a "one size fits all" approach to praise.** – Our natural tendency is to praise people the way we like to be praised, but that only works for people who are like us. What works for some personality types doesn't work for others. This is one of the many areas of managing where learning personality styles can be extremely useful.
18. **Only taking the time to give corrective feedback and not positive feedback.** - Gallup's research revealed that 65% of employees reported not receiving any recognition in the previous year. Since positive feedback is a huge motivator, not doing this is a huge mistake for that reason alone. However, if the only time you give feedback is to say something negative, soon employees will have an automatic defensive, closed down response the moment you try to give

them feedback... hardly the conditions for a constructive conversation.

19. **Using sarcastic humor to make a point.** - Some humor—used VERY judiciously—can lighten the tone and help diminish the sense of power differential that causes so much awkwardness when a boss gives a subordinate corrective feedback. That's very different from using sarcasm or "just joking" comments to make a point ("Oh, you're on the 8:23AM to 4 PM shift now?").

### **Now...How About Some Constructive Feedback For You?**

If you're really serious about finding out how you can improve your feedback giving skills, give this article to your team members. Ask them to check off those mistakes they've experienced you most frequently making and would like you to work on avoiding.

It could be an eye opener.

It also can be a huge morale and engagement building activity. Why? Because unlike many bosses who have a "Because I'm the boss I get to treat you how I feel like it and you just have to learn to deal", you are showing that you care about how you affect them, which means you care about and you respect them.

Since research by the Gallup Organization and other firms has shown that manager's caring about their employees has such a huge impact on employee motivation, loyalty, and performance, you get huge "employee motivation brownie points" just for asking.

As you know from your own experience, though, the asking HAS to be followed up by DOING. When managers or management as a whole solicits feedback or input and never does anything with it, employees develop a "why bother" attitude and lose respect and trust.

Marshal Goldsmith, an executive coach and author of the excellent book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, notes that following up repeatedly with your team to check your progress makes all the difference in the world. Over the years, he has found that this is a core difference between executives who made improvements as identified by their team, and those who didn't.

By following up and asking for feedback on your progress, you:

OK, now get that feedback!

- 1) Get a reality check
- 2) Show your employees you really do care about how you treat them
- 3) Show your employees their feedback matters
- 4) Show you're humble enough to hear feedback and are not a Know-It-All
- 5) Increase the odds THEY will want to hear your feedback
- 6) Will enjoy a much more engaged, "go the extra mile" team

**About the Author:** David Lee is an internationally recognized authority on organizational and managerial practices that optimize employee performance, morale, and engagement. He 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 trade journals from North America, Europe, Australia, and Asia. For more of his articles, go to [HumanNatureAtWork.com](http://HumanNatureAtWork.com). For information on David Lee's services and programs, call 207-929-3344 or email: [Info@HumanNatureAtWork.com](mailto:Info@HumanNatureAtWork.com).

### Comments about David Lee's Work:

"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*

"I've now worked with over 150 presenters since you last were a part of MEBSR's Spring Conference, and still you stand out as the best person we've ever had come and present on how we best work with one another, increase productivity and thrive."

*Sanna McKim, Executive Director, Maine Businesses for Social Responsibility, ME*

"It was a sheer delight to sit back and listen, learn and laugh as David weaved his extensive knowledge of the material with his abundant practical wisdom generously sprinkled with personal reflections, stories and his own wholesome humor. David brings a rare blend of practical knowledge and genuine humanity to his presentations. One cannot help but leave his sessions smarter, and a better human being, as he has a way of touching one's heart as well as one's head."

*Bill Gaertner, MD, Wisconsin*

"I was inspired by David's presentation. As onboarding new ladies and gentlemen at the Ritz-Carlton, Hotel Company LLC is one of the cornerstones of our success, I cannot agree more with his statement that, 'Everything you do in onboarding matters'."

*Diana Oreck, Vice President Global Learning & Leadership Center, Ritz Carlton, Maryland*

David, I wanted to thank you for being part our show in Las Vegas. The feedback I have received about your sessions was fantastic!!!!!! Three cheers to you.

*Julie McNeney, COO, International Council on Active Aging, Vancouver, BC*

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“Having seen a lot of speakers, I can’t tell you just how impressed I was by David. I even waited in line to talk with him... I learned a great deal and laughed my butt off in the process... When we have someone who is so genuine and so well prepared, we owe it to each other to spread the word.... I take it very seriously when I recommend someone else’s work and... he’s great!”

*Naomi Judd*

"Your presentation on resiliency is extraordinary. I left with a specific action plan for improving the quality of my daily life. Your kindness, your knowledge, and your energy combined for a helpful and inspirational workshop."

*Brenda Foster, Director of Communications, Healthwise, ID*

“David's unique blend of humor and professionalism provides an engaging forum to absorb the content of his presentation. David does not hesitate to encourage participation and captures the audiences attention consistently throughout the seminar. I left the seminar feeling that this experience was well worth the time and money.”

*Dennis Hebert, Jr., President, Merrimack Valley Chapter of the NH Credit Union League, NH*

“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 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., Vancouver, British Columbia*

“David has an uncanny ability to not only capture the attention of his audience, but also maintain a consistent level of interest in his students... Although I recognized and easily understood most of the concepts that David presented in his class, his perspective (which I value immensely due to his knowledge and intellect) and innovative style of teaching sparked my curiosity and interest, and more importantly, triggered my brain to ask more questions, deeper questions... David also has that rare ability to teach effectively to individuals that are at different levels of comprehension and understanding, and exhibit different styles of learning. ... Lastly, I would like to add a very important detail regarding David’s style of teaching and his personality. His wit and great sense of humor were very appreciated in the class by all. He has what I like to call ‘intelligent’ humor which is a gift.”

*Aditi N. Thakur, Accenture, Colorado*