Chapter 3
Giving Feedback That Sticks

by Ed Batista

"Can I give you some feedback?"

When you ask your employees this question, their heart rate and blood pressure are almost certain to increase, and they may experience other signs of stress as well. These are symptoms of a "threat response," also known as "fight-or-flight": a cascade of neurological and physiological events that impair the ability to process complex information and react thoughtfully. When people are in the grip of a threat response, they're less capable of absorbing and applying your observations.

You've probably noticed this dynamic in feedback conversations that didn't go as well as you'd hoped. Some

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people respond with explanations, defensiveness, or even hostility, while others minimize eye contact, cross their arms, hunch over, and generally look as if they'd rather be doing anything but talking to you. These fight-or-flight behaviors suggest that your comments probably won't have their desired impact.

How do you avoid triggering a threat response—and deliver feedback your people can digest and use? The guidelines that follow will help.

Cultivate the Relationship

We lay the foundations for effective feedback by building relationships with others over time. When people feel connected to us, even difficult conversations with them are less likely to trigger a threat response. Social psychologist John Gottman, a leading expert on building relationships, has found from his research that success in difficult conversations depends on what he calls “the quality of the friendship.” Gottman cites several steps we can take to develop high-quality relationships:

- **Make the other person feel “known.”** Making people aware that you see them as individuals—and not merely as employees—is a critical step in the process, but it need not be overly time-consuming. Several years ago, a coaching client of mine who ran a midsize company felt that he was too distant from his employees but didn’t have the time to take someone to lunch every day. His efficient compromise was to view every interaction, no matter how fleeting, as an opportunity to get to know that person a little better. He made a habit of asking employees one question about their work or their personal lives each time he encountered them. “Whenever I can, I connect,” he told me. Although at times this slowed his progress through the office, the result was worth it.

- **Respond to even small bids for attention.** We seek attention from those around us not only in obvious ways but also through countless subtle “bids.” As Gottman writes in *The Relationship Cure,* “A bid can be a question, a gesture, a look, a touch—any single expression that says, ‘I want to feel connected to you.’ A response to a bid is just that—a positive or negative answer to somebody’s request for emotional connection.” But many of us miss bids from our employees. That’s because we’re less observant of social cues from people over whom we wield authority, according to research by Dacher Keltner of the University of California, Berkeley, and others. To connect more effectively with employees, take stock of how much you notice—or have missed previously—their efforts to gain your attention. And solicit feedback from peers, friends, and family members on your listening skills and how often you interrupt.

- **Regularly express appreciation.** As Gottman’s research shows, the ratio of positive to negative interactions in a successful relationship is 5:1, even during periods of conflict. This ratio doesn’t apply to a single conversation, and it doesn’t mean that we’re obligated to pay someone five compliments before we can offer critical feedback (in fact,
doing so could confuse your message). But it does highlight the importance of providing positive feedback and expressing other forms of appreciation over time in order to strengthen the relationship. (See the sidebar “The Pitfalls of Positive Feedback.”)

**THE PITFALLS OF POSITIVE FEEDBACK**

Praise is supposed to make your employees feel good and motivate them, but often it does just the opposite. Here are three common problems and ways to avoid them:

1. **People don’t trust the praise.** Before delivering unpleasant feedback to your direct reports, do you say something nice to soften the blow? Many of us do—and thus unwittingly condition people to hear our positive feedback as a hollow preamble to the real message. Rather than feeling genuinely appreciated, they’re waiting for the other shoe to drop. Though you’ve diminished your anxiety about bearing bad news, you haven’t helped your direct reports receive it. You’ve actually undermined your ability to deliver any meaningful feedback, positive or negative.

   **What to do:** Instead of giving a spoonful of sugar before every dose of constructive criticism, lead off with your investment in the relationship and your reasons for having the conversation. For example: “It’s important that we can be candid and direct with each other so we can work together effectively. I have some concerns for us to discuss, and I’m optimistic that we can resolve them.”

2. **People resent it.** Managers also use positive feedback to overcome resistance to requests. This age-old tactic can work in the moment but carries a long-term cost. It creates a sense of obligation, a “social debt” the recipient feels compelled to repay by acceding to your wishes. But if you train people to always expect requests after your praise, they’ll eventually feel manipulated and resentful—and less inclined to help you out.

   **What to do:** Motivate people over the long term by expanding your persuasive tool kit. As Jay Conger explains in his classic article “The Necessary Art of Persuasion” (HBR May–June 1998), you can gain lasting influence in four ways: establish credibility through expertise and work you’ve done in others’ interests, frame goals around common ground and shared advantage, support your views with compelling data and examples, and connect emotionally with people so they’ll be more receptive to your message.

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3. **We praise the wrong things.** When aimed at the wrong targets, praise does more harm than good. As Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck notes in a January 2012 HBR IdeaCast interview, "The whole self-esteem movement taught us erroneously that praising intelligence, talent, and abilities would foster self-confidence and self-esteem, and everything great would follow. But we've found it backfires. People who are praised for talent now worry about doing the next thing, about taking on the hard task, and not looking talented, tarnishing that reputation for brilliance. So they'll stick to their comfort zones and get really defensive when they hit setbacks."

What to do: Praise effort, not ability.

Dweck suggests focusing on "the strategies, the doggedness and persistence, the grit and resilience" that people exhibit when facing challenges. And explain exactly what actions prompted your praise. If you're vague or generic, you'll fail to reinforce the desired behavior.

Set the Stage

Once you've laid the groundwork with your employee, prepare for a feedback discussion by considering logistics. It's easy to take our surroundings for granted, but they have a big impact on any interaction. Paying attention to details like these will help make your conversations more productive:

- **Timing.** Be deliberate about scheduling a feedback session, whether it is a shorter, informal conversation or a longer, in-depth discussion. Instead of simply fitting it into an available slot on your calendar, choose a time when you and the other person will both be at your best, such as at the beginning of the day, before you're preoccupied with other issues, or at the end of the day, when you can spend more time in reflection. Think about the activities you and your employee will be engaged in just before and just after you meet. If either of you are coming from (or heading to) a stressful experience, you'll be better off finding another time.

- **Duration.** We often put events on our calendars for a standard amount of time without considering what's really needed for each interaction. Think about how much time a given feedback conversation is likely to take if it goes well—and if it goes poorly. You don't want to get into a meaningful discussion with an employee and suddenly find that you're late for your next meeting. Also, consider what you'll do if the session goes worse (or better) than expected. How bad (or good) will it have to be for you to ignore the next event on your calendar in order to continue the conversation?

- **Physical location.** Meeting in your office will reinforce hierarchical roles, which can be useful when you need to establish some distance between
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yourself and the other person—but this will also induce stress and increase the odds of a threat response. A less formal setting—such as a conference room, a restaurant, or even outdoors—will put you on a more even footing and reduce the likelihood of a threat response. Choose a location that suits the needs of the conversation, ensures sufficient privacy, and minimizes interruptions and distractions.

- **Proximity.** When meeting with an employee in an office or a conference room, sitting across from each other over a desk or table creates physical distance, emphasizing your respective roles and reinforcing your authority. But you don’t always want to do that. When you’re trying to create a stronger connection with the other person or convey a greater sense of empathy, it’s preferable to sit closer and on adjoining sides of the table or desk. Think about the optimal proximity between you and the other person at that moment. Perhaps even being seated is too formal, and you should go for a walk.

**Focus on Facts, Not Assumptions**

Next, concentrate on the message you want to convey. You’re sure to elicit a threat response if you provide feedback the other person views as unfair or inaccurate. Your feedback should address their performance based on the goals and targets you set at the beginning of the year. But sometimes this assessment isn’t black and white. How do you avoid a negative reaction, given how subjective perceptions of fairness and accuracy are?

David Bradford of the Stanford Graduate School of Business suggests “staying on our side of the net”—that is, focusing our feedback on our feelings about the behavior and avoiding references to the other person’s motives. We’re in safe territory on our side of the net; others may not like what we say when we describe how we feel, but they can’t dispute its accuracy. However, when we make guesses about their motives, we cross over to their side of the net, and even minor inaccuracies can provoke a defensive reaction.

For example, when giving critical feedback to someone who’s habitually late, it’s tempting to say something like, “You don’t value my time, and it’s very disrespectful of you.” But these are guesses about the other person’s state of mind, not statements of fact. If we’re even slightly off base, the employee will feel misunderstood and be less receptive to the feedback. A more effective way to make the same point is to say, “When you’re late, I feel devalued and disrespected.” It’s a subtle distinction, but by focusing on the specific behavior and our internal response, we avoid making an inaccurate, disputable guess.

Because motives are often unclear, we constantly cross the net in an effort to make sense of others’ behavior. While this is inevitable, it’s good practice to notice when we’re guessing someone’s motives and get back on our side of the net before offering feedback. (For more on framing the feedback discussion, see the next chapter, “A Better Way to Deliver Bad News.”)
Manage Emotions

Although excessive negative feelings inhibit learning and communication, emotions play a vital role in feedback. They convey emphasis and let others know what we value. Emotional experiences stick with people, last longer in their memories, and are easier to recall. And extensive neuroscience research in recent decades makes clear that emotions are essential to our reasoning process: Strong emotions can pull us off course, but in general emotions support better decision making.

So while you’ll want to avoid triggering a threat response, don’t remove all emotion from your discussion. That can diminish the impact of your feedback and lead to a cycle of ineffective conversations. Instead, aim for a balance: Express just enough emotion to engage the other person but not so much that you provoke a hostile or defensive reaction, shut down the conversation, or damage the relationship. (If you do anticipate a combative response, see chapter 15, “Delivering Criticism to a Defensive Employee.”)

The right amount of emotion depends on the issue you’re addressing and varies from one relationship to another—and even from one day to the next. The key question is how responsive the other person will be to your emotions. A coaching client of mine who’d recently launched a company had some critical feedback for his cofounder, but previous conversations didn’t have the desired effect. For the feedback to stick, my client needed to become fairly heated and more vocally and physically expressive. This worked because the two of them had a long-standing friendship. The cofounder didn’t respond defensively—rather, the intensity got his attention. In contrast, when this same client had some critical feedback for a subordinate, he reined in his emotions, modulated his expressiveness, and delivered the feedback in a matter-of-fact tone. The goal was to convey the importance of the issues without overwhelming the subordinate, and in this case, my client’s authority was sufficient on its own.

Of course, we may not know how another person will respond to our emotions, and when we’re in the grip of strong feelings, it’s hard to calibrate how we express them in conversation. The solution is to practice. By having more feedback conversations, we learn not only how specific individuals respond to us but also how we express our emotions in helpful and unhelpful ways.

Rehearse and Repeat

With a little practice, these guidelines will help you improve your feedback skills. As with any skill you’re trying to master, experiment in low-risk situations before jumping into a high-stakes feedback conversation. Here are a few ways to make feedback a habit and improve your skills:

- Have feedback conversations more often. Rather than saving up feedback for an employee on a wide range of topics during a performance review, offer smaller pieces of focused feedback on a regular basis. Even a two-minute debrief with an employee after a meeting or a presentation can be a useful
learning opportunity for both of you. The sidebar, “When to Give Feedback,” provides some recommendations for when feedback would be beneficial, as well as when it wouldn’t.

- **Role-play difficult conversations.** With clients in my coaching practice and with my MBA students at Stanford, I’ve found that role-playing is a highly effective way to prepare to deliver challenging feedback. Conduct this exercise with a friendly colleague: Start by delivering your feedback while your colleague role-plays the recipient, which will allow you to try out different approaches. Then have your colleague give you the same feedback while you role-play the recipient. You’ll learn from your colleague’s approach, and you’ll see the conversation from your employee’s point of view. The preparation will help you refine your delivery and feel more relaxed in the actual conversation.

- **Ask for feedback yourself.** By asking employees to give you feedback on your effectiveness as a leader and manager, you’ll benefit in three ways: You’ll get valuable input; you’ll understand what it’s like to be on the receiving end; and your willingness to listen will make your own feedback mean more. If you sense that employees are reluctant to give you feedback, ask them to help you accomplish some specific goals, such as being more concise or interrupting less often. By acknowledging your own areas for improvement, you’ll make it easier for them to speak up.

**WHEN TO GIVE FEEDBACK**

As you practice giving feedback more often, you’ll learn when a behavior warrants immediate feedback. Until then, here are some suggestions as to when it is an opportune time to meet with your employee—and when you should avoid it.

 Offering feedback can be most useful in the following instances:

- **When good work, successful projects, and resourceful behavior deserve to be recognized**
- **When the likelihood of improving a person’s skills is high, because the opportunity to use those skills again is imminent**
- **When the person is already expecting feedback, either because a feedback session was scheduled in advance or because she knows that you observed the behavior**
- **When a problem cannot be ignored, because the person’s behavior is negatively affecting a colleague, the team, or the organization**

In other cases, feedback can be detrimental to the situation. Avoid giving feedback in these circumstances:

- **When you do not have all the information about a given incident**

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- When the only feedback you can offer concerns factors that the recipient cannot easily change or control

- When the person who needs the feedback appears to be highly emotional or especially vulnerable immediately after a difficult event

- When you do not have the time or the patience to deliver the feedback in a calm and thorough manner

- When the feedback is based on your personal preference, not a need for more effective behavior

- When you have not yet formulated a possible solution to help the feedback recipient move forward

Bear in mind that when you give positive feedback frequently, your negative feedback, when it is warranted, will seem more credible and less threatening. Offering input only when problems arise may cause people to see you as unappreciative or petty.