



Viewing feedback as a type of gift—something that will make other people's lives better or help them improve—is a perspective that makes it more valuable and acceptable for giver and receiver.

Feedback as a Gift

By Philip Friedrich

Many of us spend time training and coaching leaders about how to be more effective in navigating complex interpersonal and business environments. And though the concept of feedback as a gift is fairly well known, it often receives less attention than it should in our work to help others achieve success. Helping others adopt this view of feedback can be essential to building steady scaffolding around their career.

Building strong, productive relationships requires that leaders be aware of and open to opportunities to learn from others, and to help others work in that manner. It requires that leaders become more mindful. A cornerstone of that perspective is to engage with everyone both inside and outside of the organization and in a manner in which feedback is offered and received as a gift. If people view feedback as a

gift, it becomes more valuable—both for the giver and receiver.

To help leaders understand this perspective, have them look at how they give gifts and relate that to feedback. Mindful leaders understand how to skillfully offer both positive feedback that encourages behavior and feedback that is meant to be developmental. The following steps will help to reinforce a gift-giving and receiving mindset.

Giving feedback

When giving feedback, be clear about why you are giving it, inquire about the receiver's readiness to receive it, ensure you communicate respect and value, and ensure fit.

Be clear about the "why" for feedback. With a gift we are clear about why we are giving it (birthday, anniversary, or appreciation) and we try to ensure the gift is appropriate. Similarly, when we give feedback we should be clear about the reason for the giving. A gift is a positive act of giving that we believe will make another person's life better or enable him to be more successful. When we give feedback we need to be clear about our purpose and offer it, as with a gift, in a positive manner. Like a gift, feedback is valued more when it is specifically targeted to a need and the intention is positive.

Ensure the receiver is receptive. Prior to giving a gift it is useful to inquire about what the receiver needs by asking, "What would you like?" Similarly, when we see a need, and have the opportunity, to give feedback we need to ensure that the receiver will be receptive by asking, "Would you like, or be open to, feedback about X?" And, if not then, when will they be receptive, or ready to hear, your feedback? When will they be able to use your gift?

Gifts convey respect and value; so should feedback. When giving feedback think about how to offer it in a manner that will enable the other person to understand that he is valued. I'm more open to your comments if I feel you hold me in high regard.

Make sure it fits. When we give a gift, we look for something that is the right color, style, and size. To make sure our feedback fits, we also must ensure that it is specific to the person receiving it. You can be assured that if feedback is not specific to a particular event and to the person it will be received like a one-size-fits-all gift.

Also, understand that judgmental language is rarely clearly heard or accepted well by the receiver. Being judgmental is like giving a gift that fits too tightly and cuts off circulation. With

judgmental feedback, it's the circulation to the thinking part of the brain that is cut off. The best fit with feedback is achieved by being objective and specific about what you saw or heard.

Receiving feedback

To gain maximum benefit when receiving feedback we need to coach people to be receptive to ensure that they understand the feedback they receive, to check the fit, and to sincerely thank the giver.

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Be receptive. Just as we don't return a gift before we unwrap and look at it, people need to appreciate that when they receive feedback, they have to be receptive. Too often we reject the gift of feedback before we even understand it by explaining, justifying, or rationalizing our actions. Explaining why we did or didn't do something is a form of defensiveness that slams the door on opportunities for growth.

Check the fit. When we open a gift, we take a few minutes to look at it to understand how we can use it. We also should look at—and think about—feedback by asking questions to clarify what we've heard. I can explore feedback about being too blunt in my exchanges with staff by asking such questions as: "Can you give me an example of when I used that harsh language?" Leaders must recognize that their words or actions often are perceived differently

than they think they are. With a bit of exploration we gain understanding and make better decisions in the future.

When we receive a gift we try it on, or try it out, to determine how it fits. As with a gift, we can hold feedback up to ourselves and ask others how they see the fit. We can ask colleagues to help us understand the fit of feedback received. For example: "I've been told I interrupt people. Can you help me understand when I do that?" Not every gift is a perfect fit, and not all feedback will be perfectly useful every time. When you receive a gift you ask yourself, "How and where can I use this?" We need to do the same with feedback.

Show appreciation. A gift is a symbol of thoughtfulness. Just as we thank the giver when we receive a gift, we need to ensure that whoever gives us feedback appreciates that we value his feedback. A sincere thank you shows that you value that gift and ensures that you will continue to receive valuable gifts in the future.

Ken Blanchard, author of *The One Minute Manager*, famously stated that "Feedback is the breakfast of champions." Mindful, specific, constructive feedback given and received as a gift produces championship results.

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