

# Feedback—What Are the Problems

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George Bernard Shaw said the problem with communication is the illusion that what has been said has been understood and accepted. People are often given “suggestions” on how to do their jobs faster, better or cheaper. Yet, many of those suggestions fall on deaf ears. For those of us in a management or supervisory role, it can be quite annoying when we have gone to the trouble of giving feedback, that people fail to act on our suggestions.

For feedback to be meaningful, there are some key principles to be remembered.

## **Principle #1: People will not change what they don't believe.**

The first thing anyone does when they receive feedback is assess whether or not it is true. A mistake that many supervisors or managers make when giving feedback is that they speak in generalities. They say things like, “You're constantly late” or “You forget to do this all the time.” When an individual receives this generalized kind of information, they dismiss it because they believe it is false.

If you want someone to change, it is important to give them feedback that is irrefutable. For example, if you told the individual that they were late on January 4, 8, 12 and 16, it would be hard to rebut the information because it is substantiated by particular dates. Thus, a manager should observe and document an event as objectively as possible.

## **Principle #2: People have fragile egos.**

Feedback that seems like criticism is rejected. By nature, most of us have fragile egos, and our natural tendency is to want to defend ourselves if we feel we are being attacked or insulted. Thus, how one phrases feedback is

critical. It should be devoid of any evaluative language or negativity.

Saying “your research was weak” is likely to be met with opposition. A supervisor or manager will find people more receptive if they can help the individual to analyze a particular situation and come to their own conclusions. Often, open-ended questions are helpful. For example, a manager might say, “Can you tell me about how you approached your project? What procedures did you follow? Can you describe what steps you took? How were you able to come to this conclusion?” The more an individual feels you are seeking information for understanding, the more likely they are to be open to suggestions.

## **Principle #3: Do not overwhelm people with too much information.**

Often, managers and supervisors resist giving any negative feedback hoping a problem will dissolve on its own. By the time, they do give feedback, it is excessive and the individual feels defeated. He concludes that he can't do anything right or that he doesn't have the ability to change.

When giving feedback, it shouldn't be on more than one or two issues. With one or two issues, the individual feels in control, and he can more quickly see positive results.

People will continue to do what they have always done unless told differently. Feedback is necessary to help individuals within our organizations to grow and reach their potential. Yet, if feedback is given in an inappropriate manner or if it is too excessive, change will not occur.

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