

Aids for giving and receiving feedback

Some of the most important data we can receive from others (or give to others) consists of feedback related to our behaviour. Such feedback can provide learning opportunities for each of us if we use the reactions of others as a mirror for observing the consequences of our behaviour. Such personal data feedback helps to make us more aware of what we do and how we do it, thus increasing our ability to modify and change our behaviour and to become more effective in our interactions with others.

To help us develop and use the techniques of feedback for personal growth, it is necessary to understand certain characteristics of the process. The following is a brief outline of some factors that may assist us in making better use of feedback, both as the giver and receiver of feedback. This list is only a starting point. You may wish to add further items to it.

1

Focus Feedback On Behaviour Rather Than The Person

It is important that we refer to what a person does rather than comment on what we imagine he is. This focus on behaviour further implies that we use adverbs (which relate to action) rather than adjectives (which relate to qualities) when referring to a person.

Thus we might say a person “talked considerably in this meeting” rather than “this person is a loudmouth.” We talk in terms of “personality traits” it implies inherited constant qualities difficult, if not impossible, to change. Focusing on behaviour implies that it is something related to a specific situation that might be changed. It is less threatening to a person to hear comments on this behaviour than his “traits.”

2

Focus Feedback On Observations Rather Than Inferences

Observation refers to what we can see or hear in the behaviour of another person, while inferences refer to interpretations and conclusions we make from what we see or hear. In a sense, inferences or conclusions about a person contaminate our observations, thus clouding the feedback for another person. When inferences or conclusions are shared and it may be valuable to have this data, it is important that they are identified.

3

Focus Feedback On Description Rather Than Judgment

The effort to describe represents a process or reporting what occurred, while judgment refers to an evaluation in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, nice or not nice. The judgments arise out of personal frame of reference or values, whereas description represents neutral (as far as possible) reporting.

4

Focus Feedback On Descriptions Of Behaviour Which Are In Terms Of "More Or Less" Rather Than In Terms Of "Either-Or"

The "more or less" terminology implies a continuum on which any behaviour may fall, stressing quantity, which is objective and measurable, rather than quality, which is subjective and judgmental. Thus, participation of a person may fall on a continuum from low participation to high participation, rather than "good" or "bad" participation. Not to think in terms of "more or less" and the use of continua is to trap ourselves into thinking in categories, which may represent serious distortions of reality.

5

Focus Feedback On Behaviour Related To A Specific Situation, Preferably To The "Here And Now" Rather Than To Behaviour In The Abstract, Placing It In The "There And Then".

What you and I do is always tied in some way to time and place, and we increase our understanding of behaviour by keeping it tied to time and place. Feedback is generally more meaningful if given as soon as appropriate after the observation or reactions occur, thus keeping it concrete and relatively free of distortions that come with the lapse of time.

6

Focus Feedback On The Sharing Of Ideas And Information Rather Than On Giving Advice

By sharing ideas and information we leave the person free to decide for himself/herself, in the light of his/her own goals in a particular situation at a particular time, how to use the ideas and the information. When we give advice we tell him/her what to do with the information, and in that sense we take away his/her freedom to determine for himself/herself what is for him/her the most appropriate course of action.

7**Focus Feedback On Exploration Of Alternatives Rather Than Answers Or Solutions**

The more we can focus on a variety of procedures, and means for the attainment of a particular goal, the less likely we are to accept prematurely a particular answer or solution, which may or may not fit our particular problem. Many of us go around with a collation of answers and solutions for which there are no problems.

8**Focus Feedback On The Value It May Have To The Recipient, Not On The Value Or “Release” That It Provides The Person Giving The Feedback**

The feedback provided should serve the needs of the recipient rather than the needs of the giver. Help and feedback need to be given and heard as an offer, not an imposition.

9**Focus Feedback On The Amount Of Information That The Person Receiving It Can Use, Rather Than On The Amount That You Have Which You Might Like To Give**

To overload a person with feedback is to reduce the possibility that s/he may use what s/he receives effectively. When we give more than can be used we may be satisfying some need for ourselves rather than helping the other person.

10**Focus Feedback On Time And Place So That Personal Data Can Be Shared at Appropriate Times**

Because the reception and use of personal feedback involves many possible emotional reactions, it is important to be sensitive to when it is appropriate to provide feedback. Excellent feedback presented at an inappropriate time may do more harm than good.

11**Focus Feedback On What Is Said Rather Than Why It Is Said**

The aspects of feedback that relate to the what, how, when, where of what is said are observable characteristics. The why of what is said takes us from the observable to the inferred, and brings up questions of “motive” or “good intent”. To make assumptions about the motives of the person giving feedback may prevent us from hearing or cause us to distort what is said. The giving (and receiving) of feedback requires courage, skill, understanding and respect for self and others.