

AIDS FOR GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

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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 can 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 which may assist us in making better use of feedback, both as the giver and the 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 qualities) when referring to a person. Thus we might say a person "talked considerably in this meeting", rather than that this person "is a loudmouth". When 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 about his behaviour than his "traits".

2. Focus feedback on observations rather than inferences

Observations refer to what we can see or hear in the behaviour of another while inferences refer to interpretations and conclusions which 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 be so identified.

3. Focus feedback on description rather than judgement

The effort to describe represents a process for reporting what occurred, while judgement refers to an evaluation in terms of good or bad, right or wrong, nice or not nice. The judgements arise out of a 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 meaningful rather than quality, which is subjective and judgemental. 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 then 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, in the light of his 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 what to do with the information, and in that sense we take away his freedom to determine for himself what is for him 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 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 a 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 he may use what 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 which 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 "intent".

It is maybe helpful to think of "why" in terms of a specifiable goal or goals which can then be considered in terms of time, place, procedures, probabilities of attainment, etc. To make assumptions about the motives of the person giving feedback may prevent us from hearing or cause us to distort what is said. In short, if I question "why" a person gives me feedback, I may not hear what he says.

In short, the giving (and receiving) of feedback requires courage, skill, understanding and respect for self and others.