Congruent Feedback

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I'm passionate about creating work environments that truly enable and support your success. Feel free to call or email me for a complimentary mini consultation to explore potential opportunities to increase your capacity and support the success of your agile initiative. Just tell me what you think the issue is, and we'll start from there.

It may seem contradictory, but congruent feedback strengthens working relationships.

"Feedback can be defined as information about past behavior, delivered in the present, which may influence future behavior." Seashore, Seashore, and Weinberg.(1)

Strong and productive working relationships depend on congruent feedback. Without feedback, we don't know where we stand, and we don't know what to adjust. Feedback is one of the primary ways to improve working relationships.

Congruent feedback is not evaluation, criticism, labeling, praise or blame. It is a genuine effort to improve the work and working relationships. Congruent feedback balances the needs and concerns of the person offering feedback, the person receiving feedback, and the context.

Self: The person offering feedback who wants to improve some aspect of the working relationship.

Context: The work and the working relationship.

Other: A colleague deserving of respect and consideration in framing and offering feedback.

Most of the time, people assume that feedback is negative—that it aims at correcting a short-coming. But I don't think of feedback as negative (telling someone what's wrong) or positive (telling someone what's good). When feedback is offered in the spirit of improving the working relationship, it's all positive. When we offer feedback, we hope for a *change*: increasing, decreasing, or replacing a behavior.

When I teach people how to offer congruent feedback, I have them use this structure.

Create an opening that signals that you want to have an important conversation, and establishes a psychological contract to do so. The opening doesn't have to be elaborate —in fact it's better if it's not. A long wind-up either confuses the other person or induces dread. Something like, "I'd like to talk to you about the way the way we're working on this project. Is now a good time?"

It does no good to offer feedback when someone is on his way out the door to catch the bus. And remember, no grant to receive feedback is forever or applies to every topic.

Describe the behavior or events in a way the feedback receiver will recognize. Provide specific, recent

examples. Use neutral language. Words that imply evaluation (good, bad) or judgment (lazy, sloppy, irresponsible) can raise defenses rather than spark recognition.

If the feedback receiver doesn't recognize the description, he's not likely to tune in for the rest of the conversation.

State the impact so the feedback receiver understands why they might consider changing their behavior. If you can't articulate the impact, you probably shouldn't be giving the feedback. If there's no impact, a request to change behavior seems arbitrary and petty.

If the impact comes down to personal preference or personal beliefs about how people should act, reconsider why you are giving the feedback. When the behavior doesn't affect the work or the working relationship, think twice, and then think again before you give the feedback.

Make a request. Feedback doesn't mean telling someone else what to do or "getting someone else to change." Feedback is information for the recipient to act on (or not, if they so choose). And it may come with a request. The request may be for joint problem-solving, negotiation, or it may involve asking for a specific action.

After explaining the framework in a workshop, one participant was skeptical. "That's too stiff and formal. It wouldn't feel natural to me. I just come out and say what I mean."

I asked the participant to give me an example.

"Last week my cube-mate had his music on really loud," he replied, "so I went over to him and said 'Hey, I need to talk to you. When your music is so loud I can hear it through your headsets, it drives me crazy and I can't concentrate. Would you turn it down?'"

It was a perfect example. Even though he wasn't conscious of it, he'd covered all the parts of the framework using his own words, and with an informality that fit his relationship with his co-worker.

The same framework applies for offering feedback when we want to reinforce a behavior.

A statement such as "That was a good speech," doesn't give information about what specifically was good about the speech (so that goodness can be repeated) or the impact the speech had. A more helpful reinforcing message might be:

"I want to tell you about something that made your speech particularly enjoyable for me." (Opening)

"The example you used to illustrate your point about collaborative requirements, painted a picture for me." (A description that the person can recognize.)

"It helped me see how I can apply some of the techniques you described with my business partners." (Impact).

Now the person hearing the feedback has a clear idea of what he did that was helpful to at least one person listening to his speech.

Planning is Everything

Think through feedback before plunging in, especially if you feel uncomfortable. Make sure you have clear, specific, recent examples from your own experience. Using second-hand examples sets up a tattle tale dynamic and erodes trust.

Articulate the impact in a way that will make sense to the other person. Speak from your own perspective and observation, describing how the behavior affects you or the team. Appealing to vaguely defined standards of behavior—it's not professional or it's not appropriate—won't help. Professional and appropriate are both in the minds of the beholder.

Thinking about what you want to have happen as a result of giving feedback will help you decide what request to make.

Once you've worked through all the parts of the framework, practice. Role play the feedback or at least say the words out loud so you aren't fumbling when you start the conversation.

The Plan is Nothing

After you've planned and practiced, be ready to give up your plan. I've seen too many feedback conversations go off the rails because the person offering feedback was determined to finish his speech regardless of how the other person responded.

Jan wanted to give Sally feedback. So she planned and practiced and approached Sally.

"Sally," Jan started, "I want to talk to you about the meeting we had with marketing yesterday."

"Oh?" Sally replied, "What's up?"

"Yesterday in our meeting, you jumped in with the technical details three times," Jan continued.

"I wasn't aware that I was doing that! I guess it's just habit. Gosh, I'm sorry. I can see where that would be a problem now that you're in the pre-sales technical support role. Thanks for letting me know. I'll try to catch myself next time," Sally said.

"It's going make it harder for marketing to look to me for answers if you jump in. I'm new to this role, and I need to establish trust with them. When you give all the answers, it's hard for me to build that relationship," Jan plowed ahead.

"I totally get it," Sally said. "I'm embarrassed that I was doing that, because I don't want to undercut you."

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"I'd like you to stop jumping in with the technical details," Jan finished, feeling rather proud at getting her message out.

"I get it!" Sally snapped. "You don't have to rub my nose in it."

In sales, this is called *selling past the close*. Salesmen who keep selling once the customer has agreed to buy end up losing the sale. The same will happen when you offer feedback and don't acknowledge the other person's response: rather than improve the working relationship, you may damage it.

Back Leading

Joe was a project manager working on contract. He'd received some upsetting feedback from his client. He looked dejected as he described the feedback he'd received. "They tell me that people from the project team are complaining. They told me I'm a demotivating person," Joe lamented.

Understandably enough, Joe didn't know what to do to improve his relationship with the team or improve his client's perception of him. How could he? There was no information in the feedback Joe's client gave him.

Sadly, too many people who are in a position to give feedback don't know how.

When you receive feedback that's cryptic or not actionable, back lead. Ask questions to draw out useful information.

Joe might create an opening by saying, "I want to understand this concern. I'd like to ask you some questions so I can decide what to change."

Then, probe for specific, concrete descriptions of behavior.

"Can you give me an example of things I do that lead to your assessment?"
"Can you tell about a time when my actions had the effect you describe?"

In Joe's case, the impact is clear: some people feel demotivated. That's not always the case. A woman in a workshop reported that her boss told her "she was too nice." She probed for impact by asking "Can you give me an example of how my style impacts my effectiveness?"

The feedback giver may need a bit of time to pull up examples; a responsible feedback giver will take the time to do so.

If feedback is so important to working relationships, why do people put it off or avoid giving feedback completely?

The (stated) reasons are legion:

It's not my place

I don't want him to feel bad

I don't want to embarrass her

I'm afraid he'll get angry

I'm afraid she'll cry

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He should know

He must know

None of these is the real reason. The real reasons are different.

The first one is "I'll be uncomfortable." That's a real possibility. It can be awkward to give feedback. But is the short-lived discomfort worse than the long-term effects? I coached a team that had put off *for a year* the discomfort of offering feedback to a senior team member, Sam, who picked his nose.

During that year, other team members avoided working closely with Sam. And they paid a price. Each team member inhibited his own development by cutting off opportunities to learn from Sam. Because their interactions were limited, the team didn't learn about technical problems as soon as they could have because they weren't talking to Sam. Team members started to resent Sam for "not getting it" as they hinted and made vague statements about hygiene. Sam felt that he was excluded by the team; his engagement in their project dropped.

You be the judge: which is worse? One uncomfortable conversation or a year of lower productivity, resentment and hurt feelings?

The second reason cuts closer to the bone: "I'm afraid he/she won't love me if I give feedback." It may seem contradictory, but congruent feedback strengthens working relationships. Congruent feedback indicates that you are invested in the relationship and want it to be better.

(1)Seashore, Charles, Edith Whitfield Seashore and Gerald M. Weinberg. What Did You Say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback. Bingham House Books. Columbia, Maryland, 1997.

This article originally appeared in *The Gift of Time: Celebrating the Work of Gerald M. Weinberg*, Dorset House Publishing.