

**A guide to...**

**Giving and receiving  
constructive feedback**



## How to use the Guide

This how-to guide is designed to help you as someone who is giving feedback, receiving feedback or both.

The guide, divided into two parts, provides you with practical advice at each step, and for those who are already familiar with giving and receiving feedback, a checklist to make sure you have thought through all the key points.

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# Introduction

## What's expected of us?

The ability to give and receive honest feedback, in an environment of mutual trust and support, is critical.

There is an expectation on all of us to collect feedback throughout the year:

- Verbally as we interact with each other (post meetings, discussions, one to one sessions, etc.)
- Periodically when we reach key milestones
- As part of the PDR process.

We have an obligation to each other to give feedback quickly, honestly and constructively. We should actively solicit feedback, genuinely listen and consider the feedback, thanking the individual for providing the feedback.

Feedback should focus on three key areas:

- What went well / strengths?
- How we reflect the organisation's Values and Behaviours
- What we could do differently to develop and improve.

# Part 1 – Giving Feedback



## At a glance – Key points about giving feedback:

- Be clear what you're being asked to provide feedback on
- Remind yourself of your organisation's Values and Behaviours
- Write down the key points
- Keep them factual
- Allocate enough time to the feedback session
- Keep to the facts and be honest
- Be specific
- Be objective – describe behaviour not personality, attitude or character
- Focus on what is missing, rather than what is wrong – this helps better performance next time
- Present feedback as a positive opportunity, not a threat
- Don't give negative comments, be constructive – create alternatives
- Don't try and 'sort' everything in one go
- Do your homework and prepare balanced feedback.

## Giving feedback

As part of the PDR process, we are all encouraged to seek out and give positive and constructive feedback so that we can improve how we work together, with colleagues, stakeholders and both internal and external partners.

Feedback should be a regular part of one to one conversations and definitely an agenda item on PDR Interim and Annual Reviews. The purpose of feedback is to **AID** someone to do better. You need to address three topics when giving it:

### Giving immediate feedback – spotting something great!

When we experience a colleague doing something really well, it can be helpful and best of all, highly motivational to give them immediate feedback. Being able to tell someone what you observed, the positive impact of their actions and the effect the interaction had on the situation helps them recognise the value of their actions to the organisation.

**However**, use this technique *only* when you have good news to share. This approach should not be used when you have potentially negative feedback to share (see following page).



Follow these steps:

Having briefly thought through **what** you observed and the **positive impact** of the action, ask permission to give the feedback, for example *“Have you got a moment, can I give you some feedback?”*

Then, proceed to describe the **Action** and the **Impact** of what they said and what they did.

#### **Giving immediate feedback to deal with something negative**

Whilst we may be tempted to give immediate feedback when we see something negative, the best advice is **don't!**

If you see something which needs to be fed back, instead of dealing with it instantly, ask the colleague if you can arrange a brief catch up – explain you have something you want to discuss with them. For example: *“that was a challenging meeting wasn't it? There are a couple of things I would like to follow up on, when is a good time to catch up?”*

Arrange a time to speak face to face and follow the guidance below, in particular the section ‘The Feedback Conversation’:



### Creating space and time to prepare

Feedback is an essential part of the PDR process. If we get it right, feedback can also be experienced as a gift and we owe it to the people who ask us to provide feedback to spend time reflecting carefully before providing feedback.

Before you give feedback, find some time when you will not be interrupted, when you can reflect on your experiences working with the recipient of the feedback.

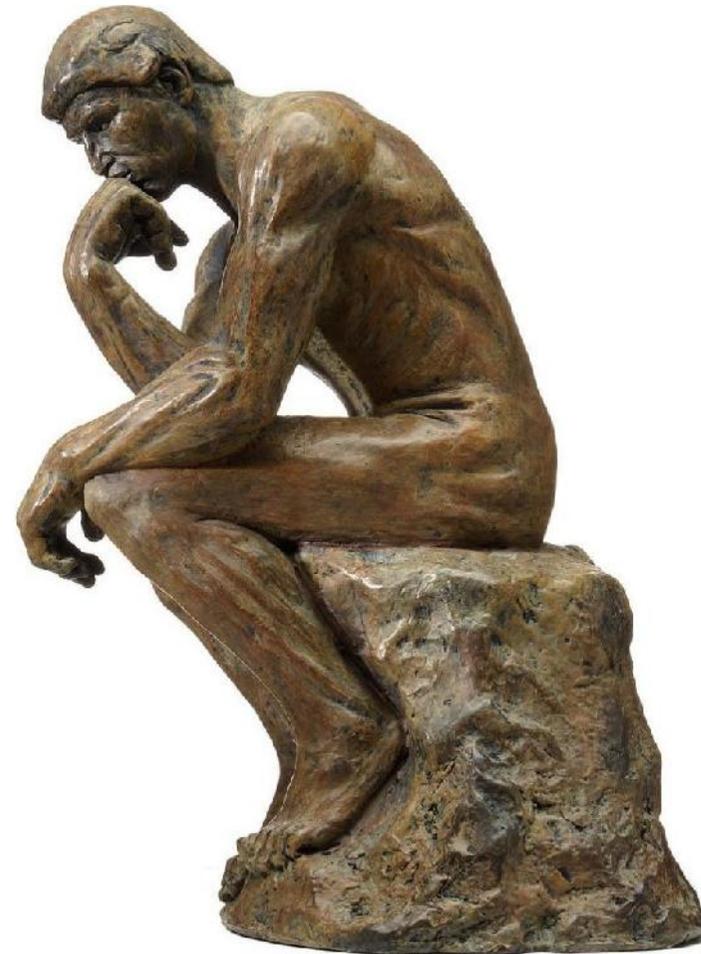
Resist the temptation to give feedback before you make time to think through what you're going to say.

### Be clear what you're being asked to provide feedback on

When you're asked to provide feedback by a colleague, make sure what you're being asked to provide feedback on. For example, the colleague may be asking for your feedback on how they've reflected the organisation's Values and Behaviours in the work they've delivered, but they could be asking for feedback on their leadership skills or even a report they've written.

If you want to volunteer feedback, for example, share concerns regarding something you've seen the recipient do, be clear about what the **Action** was that you observed and the **Impact** it had.

Once you're clear on the subject of the feedback, think of actual situations where you've interacted with the recipient or where you've observed them working with other people, perhaps colleagues or customers.



### **Keep feedback factual, honest and specific**

Meaningful feedback is objective feedback – feedback based on what we actually observe as opposed to hearsay, opinion or other subjective information.

Think about what you observed and the impact it had on you and others involved and if it helps, write it down. Making a note of the location or date of the interaction can also be helpful as it will enable you to recall the situation again with ease. Be honest at all times.

Where you're asked for feedback don't be tempted to give feedback which goes beyond what you're being asked to provide feedback about; this only serves to complicate the feedback conversation and may reduce the impact of your feedback, clouding the important issues.

### **Feedback around organisational Values and Behaviours**

You may be asked to provide feedback regarding the way the recipient has 'lived' the organisation's Values and Behaviours – how you have observed them using the Values and Behaviours. If you are unfamiliar with your organisation's Values and Behaviours, you might want to review them first.

Once you have reminded yourself of the Values and Behaviours, again, think of situations where you have observed specific behaviours being used by the recipient. Note them down as part of your preparation to give feedback.



### **Focus on what is missing, rather than what is wrong – this helps better performance next time**

Being told what is 'wrong' with something we've done is likely to induce a defensive reaction in us – we instinctively want to respond by justifying why we did what we did. This gets the feedback discussion nowhere. Instead, focus on what is missing or what the recipient could do differently next time to improve the outcome. **Feedback is actually an opportunity, not a threat.** Keeping future focused will ensure you minimise the chance of being met with defensiveness.

### **Avoid negative comments – be constructive, create alternatives**

We do things most of the time for the best of intentions. So, when someone makes negative comments in their feedback, we tend to react! Once we become defensive, we stop listening and the feedback conversation ceases. To avoid this potential situation occurring, think about how you can give the feedback in a constructive way. One way of achieving this is to think about alternative ways the recipient could achieve the same outcome. So, alongside explaining the impact of what they actually did / said, you can offer some suggestions as to how they could act differently and achieve the same outcome when the situation next arises.



### **Don't try and 'sort' everything in one go**

Nobody likes to receive lots of challenging information all at one go, we need time to reflect on what has been said, think about changes we will make and build resolve to do things differently. It's much better to spread challenging feedback over a number of discussions and to intersperse it with positive feedback.

### **Feedback to your manager**

Managers should solicit feedback from their direct reports to help them do their job better. You should feel comfortable and confident in giving honest, open and constructive feedback to your line manager in the same way that you give feedback to any other colleague. If you feel uncomfortable giving feedback to your line manager, for whatever reason, you are encouraged to talk with your manager about your concerns. All the points shared in this Guide are equally relevant to giving 'upward' feedback to your line manager.



# The Feedback Conversation

Having prepared, when you are ready to give feedback remember the following steps:

- Give the context
- Describe the specific behaviour/action
- Explain the impact (positive or otherwise)
- If you are invited, offer suggestions on how to improve performance.

## Dealing with difficult conversations

If you have to share difficult feedback, the following modified approach will help:

- Give the context
- Describe the problem behaviour/action
- Say why it is a problem
- Explain the impact
- Ask for their perspective
- Encourage them to explore alternatives – ways to improve performance next time
- Once they are exploring alternatives for themselves, add-in your own suggestions
- Give them some encouragement – build their confidence – be supportive!



### What to do if someone is being negative

If the recipient of the feedback is experiencing the feedback in a negative way:

- Listen actively – let them talk
- Show empathy and demonstrate you are listening – paraphrase and reflect back what you've heard
- Acknowledge them, acknowledge their feelings
- Provide confidence
- Express your views without provoking and if necessary, reaffirm the fact that you are offering feedback to help them improve their performance at their invitation; it is their choice if they accept the feedback and use it.



# Part 2 – Requesting and Receiving Feedback

## **At a glance – Key points about requesting and receiving feedback:**

- Decide which colleagues to request feedback from
- Request feedback from a representative sample of people you interact with at different levels
- Don't just rely on email to request feedback, talk to people, explain why you are asking for feedback and what you want feedback on
- Give your respondents time to prepare
- Prepare yourself for the feedback
- Remind yourself of your organisation's Values and Behaviours
- Have a plan for the feedback discussion – a structure for the conversation
- If you become flustered, upset, annoyed, irritated or defensive with something that is said – take a moment to catch your breath or even adjourn the conversation
- Think about how you will use the feedback – discuss it with your line manager and use it to build your personal development plan
- Follow-up the actions you agree and continue to request feedback to help you achieve your personal development goals



### Inviting people to give feedback

To ensure respondents are willing and prepared to give you feedback, speak to them if possible face to face to ask for feedback. Don't just rely on an email – gain their commitment.

### Be clear why you are requesting feedback and on what you want the feedback to be based:

Whether you are inviting colleagues inside the organisation or stakeholders outside the organisation for feedback, explain why you are asking for the feedback – what it's to be used for – this will give the respondent the context they need to prepare.

Explain what you are asking for feedback on – is it your performance at a particular event / meeting, the way you 'live' the organisation's Values and Behaviours, how you facilitate discussions etc. The clearer you are on the 'what' the more specific the feedback will be.

### Time to prepare

Remember your respondents will need some time to reflect and prepare their feedback. Don't expect an immediate response.



# Receiving Feedback

## How you see yourself and how others might see you

Feedback is a gift and we owe it to the people who provide us with feedback to prepare carefully to receive it.

It's helpful to remember that we like receiving good feedback, but when we receive feedback that we're not expecting, don't recognise or don't believe, we tend to react in a negative way – often becoming defensive and ceasing to be open minded. The negative feedback has activated the threat receptors in our brain and we're experiencing the fright / flight emotion; not a good place to be when receiving and exploring feedback! It is therefore critical that we get ourselves into a reflective, open frame of mind before receiving feedback such that we can observe and absorb the feedback before starting to react to it.

## Creating a receptive frame of mind

To prepare effectively, find some time to think about how you see yourself and how others (the people from whom you have requested feedback) may see you.

What experiences or situations may they be drawing upon when preparing your feedback? If, for example, they've experienced you in a challenging situation and seen you demonstrating particular behaviours, these may be reflected in their comments.



Remember that you do not have to accept all the feedback you receive, especially until you have understood it. The following analogy may help:

*Receiving feedback is like watching a drama unfold on the stage, a drama that portrays parts of your life. As an observer, sitting in the audience, you can watch the drama as the feedback unfolds. You can choose to stay in the audience, or step onto the stage. When you step onto the stage, you engage with the feedback, but, remember, the events the drama is portraying are in the past – it tells a story of how others experience you and the impact of your actions. You can learn from the drama (your feedback) as both an audience member and by joining the actors. What you can't do is change the events that your drama (feedback) is based on, but you can change the future by learning from the past.*

### **Reminding yourself of the organisation's Values and Behaviours**

Your feedback may include reference to your organisation's Values and Behaviours – how your respondents experience you 'living' these behaviours in your day to day work



# The Feedback Discussion

## A conversation structure

If you're feeling a little awkward getting into a feedback discussion, use the following structure:

- Thank the colleague (respondent) for taking the time to prepare and give you feedback
- Remind them what you are asking for feedback about and why
- Invite them to share their feedback
- Ask questions to clarify the information they share to ensure you fully understand it including examples or situations they refer to. Try to avoid any temptation to start to react to the feedback – your job is to listen at this point
- Ask them to explain the impact of your actions
- Invite them to share any ideas they have as to how you can improve
- Discuss any ideas you have and explore the pros and cons of the ideas
- If you're ready, share what you're going to do differently
- Ask your colleague to keep providing you with feedback as you implement your improvement plan.



### **Focusing on evidence not opinions**

If there are parts of your feedback that are contradictory or you do not recognise comments that have been made about you, it may be helpful to reflect on whether the feedback is based on evidence – things that have actually happened, or opinion.

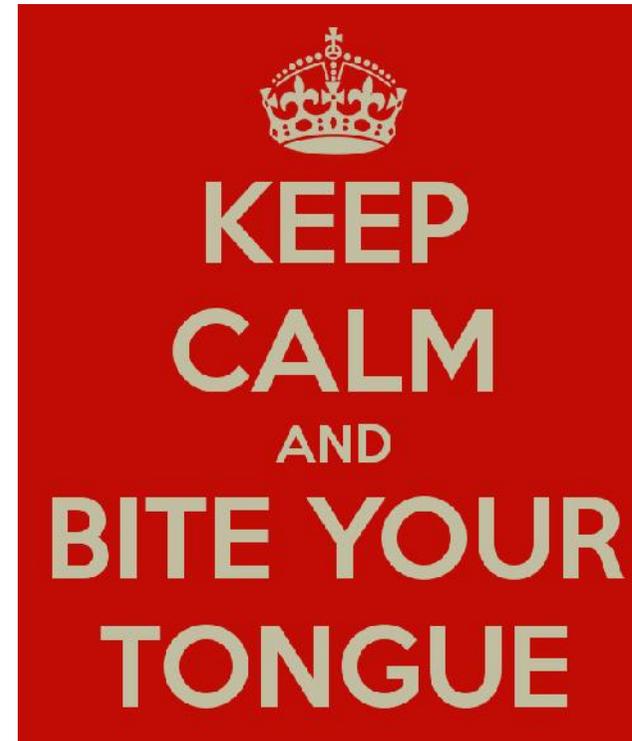
### **What if you begin to feel defensive or reject the feedback?**

Feedback can be a difficult thing to receive. If you begin to feel defensive, angry or upset, take a deep breath. Ask for a short break while you catch your breath. Don't take your feelings out on the person who is offering the feedback!

Remember the Observer perspective shared above and try not to engage with the content of the feedback – you don't have to justify yourself regarding something that has already happened. If you need to adjourn the session, do it and spend some time on your own reflecting on what you've been told.

Once you've had chance to compose yourself and absorb the information, ask the respondent to continue the feedback conversation.

***Don't just plough on if you're feeling irritated, annoyed or angry – it will be of no use to anyone, least of all you.***



### Thinking through how to use the feedback

Feedback is particularly valuable in giving us insight into how others experience our behaviour and our actions. As the Johari Window tool highlights, there are things known to us and not to others; there are things known to us and known to others, there are also things known to others and not to us. It is this latter category which feedback is particularly helpful in illuminating; shining a light on things we do not see or are not aware of.

Feedback thus helps us identify ways we can build behaviours to higher levels, building on things we already do, finding higher levels of competence and skill. Once we understand a) there is a higher level of competence and b) what this looks like, we can undertake personal development to help us achieve the higher level of skill and behaviour. This is summarised in the diagram opposite.

### Understanding strengths and development areas

Don't be hard on yourself; take a balanced perspective on your feedback, recognising both the strengths and the areas for development. Best practice involves picking some of your strength areas for further development (areas you can excel in) and picking some of your development areas. In doing this, you can enjoy the challenge of some stretching work, tackling areas of weakness along with the positive reinforcement of building on some existing strengths.

Think through your Objectives for the coming year and the challenges you face delivering them. What behaviours are you going to use? Which behaviours would help you deliver these more effectively?



## In discussion with your line manager, use the following steps to help you develop your workplace behaviours

- Reflect on your feedback and identify the specific behaviours you want to improve. Don't make things too complicated by picking more than 3 at a time. Talk the feedback through with a colleague – having an independent perspective can be very helpful.
- What does your feedback tell you? You're at the Contemplation stage, so think through what the higher level of performance looks like.
- Form your thoughts into Objective(s) – try to make them as SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound) as possible. Be clear what it will look like when you achieve the higher level of performance.
- In discussion with your line manager, add these Objectives to your PDR Personal Development Plan along with the Success Criteria.
- Think about who can help you by continuing to provide you with feedback to help you on your way – your line manager, colleagues, peers, etc. You'll need feedback from people you trust, some encouragement and a listening ear as well as determination! You're at the Preparation stage.
- Get cracking – practicing the behaviour(s) at the higher level, seeking feedback as you progress (Action stage). There'll be some knocks along the way, but also the satisfaction of success as you develop the behaviours.
- As you build your confidence and competence, the new level of performance will begin to become second nature. You've arrived at your objective – congratulations!

***Your line manager is there to help and support you. Follow up your development plan objectives regularly in one to one meetings and PDR Reviews***



### Finally, following up

Follow-up to check progress against agreed behavioural change objectives is essential if behavioural change is to occur and be sustained. A recent study by Marshall Goldsmith and Howard Morgan (the follow up factor in Management Development) found that where there is no follow up, over 60% of people make no or minimal change to their behaviour.

Where there is consistent follow up, over 50% of people achieve sustained positive behavioural change. This just goes to show the value of continuing to ask colleagues for feedback and checking in at one to one meetings.

Ongoing feedback helps us celebrate success as we get positive reinforcement of the behavioural changes we have made and helps keep us 'on track' should we be finding the change difficult to sustain.



## Contact us...

Vybrant Organisation Ltd  
Thatcham House  
Turner's Drive  
Thatcham  
RG19 4QD

Email: [hellovybrant@vybrant.org](mailto:hellovybrant@vybrant.org)  
Website: [www.vybrant.org](http://www.vybrant.org)  
Tel: 01635 869644