

Getting Ready To Feedback

A few months ago I was attending a large event, sitting at a typical table round of eight. Very soon I found myself really disliking one member of the group. Now for me to say this is an intentional surprise—I want to keep you reading—but also I'll report, it was a surprise to me, too. I'm generally an easygoing type. (You'll have to take my word on this.) A "people person" as they say. Because I teach interpersonal communication, I'm pretty self-aware most of the time. And, I don't remember being in a grumpy mood that day. So, you are probably asking, "What in the world did this individual do that put me off?"

Well, I can't actually describe what she was doing because I'm struggling to think what words, actions or other nonverbals were triggering my negative reactions. Yet, I can easily recall the irritation I felt and can tell you the stories I was making up about her. "She's got a big ego." "She thinks this program is a waste of time." Lots of adjectives like "rude" and "snobby" were too quickly swimming around in my head. I did notice these internal judgments at the time, but I didn't really pay much attention to the individual. Could I communicate any feedback to this person if (and that's a big if), I decided I should?

First Decision

No. I could not. The first major decision in feedback is do you have a right to give any? I had no such right. She didn't do anything that even remotely violated my "human rights" so to speak. Also, our relationship was one of having just met. But even if I had a right to coach her—say for instance she was someone who worked for me—or maybe for some reason she asked me to coach her. The reality in this case is that I could not *effectively* give her feedback (which is only one element of coaching), if I met her today since I cannot specifically describe what behavior I objected to. What was she doing? To me, this is the most overlooked aspect of giving feedback.

I sometimes say this as a kind of law:

If you can't describe it, don't expect it. If you can't describe it, don't expect it to stop.

The "it" is behavior—not what we think the behavior means, not the feelings and mental stories we make up in an instant. Too often we start feedback by stating our interpretations, rather than our observations: "You have a bad attitude." "You don't care." "That's rude."

Where To Start

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Just because we think something, that doesn't make it true. No matter how strongly we hold an opinion, that doesn't make it a fact. Start feedback with the facts. In this case of the event guest,

I can't remember the facts because I didn't pay enough attention in the moment. Even if I had, too much time has gone by. The person is not going to remember her actions. So a second

fundamental guideline for feedback is; don't wait too long. Bringing the case up too late will only make the other person defensive. Then again, if it's a habit the person has, you won't have to wait very long before you have another example to consider using as your starting point.

Gathering information is work. Being specific is work. Most often we think that the hardest part of giving feedback is managing our emotions and staying respectful in voice and body language. Certainly, without a doubt, these are tough and definitely required. However, can we describe specifically what the person did or did not do? Did the individual interrupt others? Did she speak exclusively to the person on her left? Did she talk too loud? Too fast? Did she start eating before all the others were served?

These behaviors would be specific enough for feedback. However, they aren't what she did, so I should not attempt feedback for this reason alone. My next step in this case is to forgive, let go, and not hold onto some vague evaluation caused by the negative first impression. Because chances are relatively good that in our not-all-that-big Dane County, I will meet her again!

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