Giving and Receiving Feedback: A Guide

Introduction

One of the most precious contributions an individual can offer to another's learning journey is the gift of constructive feedback. Whether in the role of a student or a teacher, each one of us possesses the capacity to provide valuable insights that can significantly enhance another person's learning experience. The act of giving feedback not only demonstrates your genuine concern for someone's growth but also signifies the merit of their work in your eyes. It is a dual affirmation, acknowledging the individual's worthwhile sharing your perspectives on something they have invested their efforts in. Every person has the potential to provide meaningful feedback, but some excel in employing it more effectively. The skills of giving and receiving feedback can be cultivated by focusing on the attributes of worthwhile feedback and how it can be conveyed in ways that augment its contribution to the learning process.

Distinguishing Good from Poor Feedback

Before delving into the nuances of valuable feedback, it is crucial to differentiate it from the kinds of feedback that can be unhelpful or even detrimental. We are all familiar with the experience of receiving poor feedback, which can leave us feeling attacked, disheartened, belittled, and invalidated. Poor feedback typically possesses several inherent characteristics: it targets the person as a whole rather than their specific actions or work, it lacks helpful suggestions for improvement, it reflects the critic's needs rather than the recipient's, and it can inundate the individual with a deluge of destructive comments, dehumanizing them in the process.

In contrast, beneficial feedback upholds the value of the individual while providing support and reactions specific to the matter at hand. The person giving feedback demonstrates their appreciation for the recipient and their attentiveness to the recipient's goals and needs. However, this does not imply that praise should be the sole form of feedback. In fact, insincere or contrived praise, or praise directed towards the person rather than their actions, can be counterproductive, potentially feeling patronizing or controlling. Constructive criticism should be delivered within a context of overall support, fostering mutual trust.

Constructive feedback draws a clear distinction between the person, who is inherently valued, and their specific actions or work, which may be subject to critique. This distinction underscores the idea that a person is not defined by their actions, and their actions do not define the entirety of their being. However, this does not absolve individuals of responsibility for their behaviour. Regardless of the nature of a person's actions, effective feedback can only be communicated when their inherent humanity is respected.

Providing Feedback

In the discussion that follows, the term "work" or "contribution" is used to describe the subject of the feedback. This "work" can take various forms, including essays, class contributions,

designs, behaviours, or projects in written oral, graphic, or other formats. While there are numerous facets of valuable feedback, the most crucial aspect lies in how it is delivered. The tone, style, and content should consistently convey the message: "I value you and your efforts, and everything I say should be interpreted in this context." To provide constructive feedback effectively, consider the following:

Be Realistic: Direct your comments toward actionable matters within the person's control. Avoid making suggestions that are beyond the person's scope. Constructive feedback should respect the individual's unique approach to tasks.

Be Specific: Avoid vague generalizations. Base your comments on observable behaviours or materials. Always substantiate your general impressions or inferences with concrete examples. Focusing on behaviour implies the potential for change. Provide specific information that allows the recipient to pinpoint the areas under discussion.

Be Sensitive to Goals: Recognize that a person's contributions may align with their specific goals, which may differ from your own. Tailor your feedback accordingly. While sharing your perspective is valid, make it clear when you are offering views based on your own objectives. Establish a shared understanding of any common task goals.

Be Timely: Provide feedback when it is relevant and needed. Offering feedback long after the recipient has moved on to other matters is ineffective. Respond promptly when feedback is requested.

Be Descriptive: Express your views without evaluative judgments or attempts to dictate the recipient's emotions. Offer your considered opinions, adhering to the outlined characteristics. Allow the recipient to accept or reject the feedback as they see fit.

Be Non-judgmental: Offer your personal viewpoint rather than assuming an authoritative stance, even if you hold expertise in other areas. Share your reactions and emotions instead of making value-laden statements. Use expressions like "I feel... when you..." to convey your perspective.

Avoid Comparisons: Treat each person's work as unique, refraining from fostering unnecessary competition. Be cautious when providing feedback in contexts where your comments for one person will be compared to those of others, as such comparisons undermine intrinsic motivation.

Be Diligent: Double-check your response for accuracy and alignment with your intended message. Ensure that you have accurately understood the contribution in question. There is nothing more frustrating than receiving criticism from someone who has not paid attention to your work.

Be Direct: Articulate your thoughts clearly without unnecessary complexity or abstract language. Be straightforward in your communication.

Be Positive: Acknowledge and appreciate positive aspects, rather than focusing solely on negatives. Seek genuine points of appreciation, as forced positivity can be counterproductive.

Be Self-aware: Assess your emotional state before providing feedback. Anxiety or defensiveness can distort otherwise constructive comments. Prioritize the recipient's needs and focus on their growth rather than self-expression. Avoid overwhelming them with excessive feedback.

Receiving Feedback

Seeking feedback from others is fruitless unless you are willing to embrace it and consider viewpoints that differ from your own. As the recipient:

Be Explicit: Clearly communicate the type of feedback you are seeking and specify any types you do not wish to receive. Remember that feedback from others is entirely for your benefit, and articulating your preferences is essential to receive relevant input.

Be Attentive: Concentrate fully on what is being conveyed to you. Focus on the information the person wishes to impart, rather than what you hope to hear.

Be Self-aware: Recognize your intellectual and emotional reactions. Pay particular attention to any impulses of rejection or censorship on your part. If someone's viewpoint contrasts with your own, do not dismiss it. Understanding the perspectives of others can be enlightening. Some individuals find it helpful to detach themselves partially and approach the feedback as if it were directed at someone else.

Be Silent: Refrain from forming a response, even mentally, until you have carefully listened and considered the implications of what has been said. Do not use the pretext of correcting factual errors as an excuse to avoid engaging with the substance of the feedback. Resist the urge to explain yourself immediately; if necessary, provide explanations after the feedback session, once you have thoroughly absorbed the input.

Written vs. Face-to-Face Feedback

In principle, there is no distinction between feedback delivered in written form and that given in person. However, written feedback lacks the opportunity to resolve misunderstandings, necessitating explicit specification of the desired feedback types and the formulation of responses. When providing written feedback, pay extra attention to tone and style, as you won't have the chance to adjust your response based on the recipient's immediate reactions.

Adapted from: Boud, D. (1991). Implementing Student Self Assessment. HERDSA Green Guide. No. 5. Second Edition. Sydney: HERDSA. Revised October 1994.