



The Art of Giving Feedback

Regular feedback is a powerful tool for developing your team and supporting their growth.

For many leaders, giving positive feedback comes easily, but giving negative feedback can be more challenging. This article provides best-practice strategies for giving effective feedback—through building trust, promoting a growth mindset, and developing the courage to tackle difficult performance conversations.

Giving constructive feedback is an essential leadership skill. It is only through feedback that nursing staff understands what they are doing right or what they may need to do differently. The best feedback is that which is immediate and actionable. The annual performance evaluation alone does not meet the needs of the contemporary workforce; our millennial workforce actually has a desire for frequent feedback from their leaders, according to a 2017 Gallup report.¹ In 2014, Stone and Heen recommended that leaders wishing to be effective engage in three types of feedback conversations with their staff.²

The first type is *appreciation feedback*, which conveys gratitude for the employee's contribution. According to Kouzes and Posner, giving appreciative feedback is a means of "encouraging the heart," one of five exemplary practices of leadership.³ Positive feedback has been shown to be extremely important to maintaining team and individual motivation. This type of input both builds a relationship and improves the engagement of staff in their work.

The second type of feedback is *coaching feedback*, which is designed to expand knowledge, sharpen skills, and develop staff. Coaching staff to higher levels of performance has become a vital part of the leader's role. When you coach, you can help your team members build personal mastery, reach a higher level of productivity, increase their professional competence, manage conflict better, and reduce their stress. Your goal in coaching is to create a practice setting that ensures quality, safety, cost-effectiveness, and joy and meaning.

Ideally, staff receive the coaching and appreciation feedback throughout the year, in contrast to the third type of feedback, the *performance evaluation*, which typically occurs once a year (or more often) and involves rating staff against a set of standards.

For most leaders, giving positive feedback comes easily, but giving negative feedback is more challenging. Leaders often choose to avoid discussions with staff

that they think will end in a confrontation. However, when problematic behavior is not addressed, it lowers the morale of the team and erodes trust in the leader. A failure to address performance issues on your team can have serious ramifications. When poor practices are engaged in repeatedly and nothing is done about them, staff begin to accept a lower standard of care, and the behaviors can become normalized. Timely and honest feedback—delivered respectfully—can build the confidence of staff and create trust in the leader. Regular feedback is a powerful tool for developing your team and supporting their career growth. Feedback is like a muscle; it must be used frequently in order to develop. The purpose of this article is to provide best-practice strategies for giving effective feedback—through building trust, promoting a growth mindset, and developing the courage to tackle difficult performance conversations.

ESTABLISH A CLIMATE OF TRUST

It is often said that trust is the currency of leadership. Leaders who are not trusted by staff experience challenges when giving feedback^{3,4}; However, trust is not built overnight. In *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Covey uses the metaphor of an emotional bank account to describe how trust is built.⁵ If, as a leader, I make deposits with you in this emotional bank account through confidentiality, courtesy, kindness, honesty, and keeping my commitments, then I build a reserve of trust. Your trust in me grows, and I can call on that trust when I need it. When trust is high, giving feedback is more comfortable, and it is more openly received. If instead I show a lack of concern or disrespect, if I fail to follow through on commitments or overreact in situations, then my emotional bank account can quickly become overdrawn. You won't trust me when I give you feedback because you don't feel psychologically safe.

Psychological safety is crucial to creating an environment that fosters learning and a strong feedback loop.



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Expectations regarding interpersonal consequences in a work setting are formed by the level of psychological safety—and determine one's behavior in that setting. Amy Edmondson, an expert on psychological safety in the workplace, describes it as “the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking.”⁶ An action that might be unthinkable in one setting would be readily taken in another where there is a culture of psychological safety. Feedback is not as threatening in environments that are psychologically safe because staff realize that it is given to help them to grow professionally. In such an environment, staff can take it for granted that others will respond positively when they put themselves on the line by asking a question, seeking feedback, reporting a mistake, or introducing a new idea.

Consistency in how leaders approach delivering feedback is critical to building trust. When the staff expect to receive feedback on an ongoing basis, the feedback feels safer. This expectation should be set during the orientation process. A leader should have regular check-ins with new staff members to both give and receive feedback, which helps to build strong relationships. It also reduces the anxiety a staff member may feel when a leader asks to talk to her or him. Performance feedback is especially essential for new graduates, who often have difficulty gauging how well they are doing in their role. One challenge with

some new graduates is that they may become stressed and anxious and even demonstrate catastrophic thinking when suggestions are made to improve their performance. Seligman believes that managers have the capacity to help to decrease stress by using an active, authentic, and constructive style.⁷ New graduates need to be coached from the time of their job interview that feedback is part of professional development and that they should expect to receive it and to act on suggestions that are made.

Nurse leaders are in a unique position to build trust by modeling how to receive feedback. When leaders see feedback given to them as a gift and are not emotionally triggered by it, they set a powerful example for staff. When leaders demonstrate feedback-seeking behaviors, it results in greater job satisfaction for staff, greater creativity on the team, and lower turnover.² DeLong suggests that leaders can do this by asking the following three feedback-seeking questions⁸:

1. What should I stop doing?
2. What should I keep doing?
3. What should I start doing?

PROMOTE A GROWTH MINDSET

Constructive feedback that is taken and put into practice can lead to significant improvements in performance. The key is to be intentional in how it is given.



The goal of the leader when providing feedback should be to promote a “growth mindset.” Carol Dweck is a pioneer in the study of how adopting a growth mindset can transform how staff perceive feedback. A mindset, according to Dweck, is perceptions or theories that people hold about themselves.⁹ Mindsets can either be growth oriented or fixed. Individuals with a growth mindset believe that their skills and abilities can be developed through feedback about their performance and hard work. Brains and talent are just the starting point. This view of oneself creates a better acceptance of feedback and a love of learning. In contrast, staff members with a fixed mindset may believe that they are doing the best they can and can no longer grow professionally. Individuals with a fixed mindset find feedback to be more threatening because they lack confidence about their ability to improve.

When a growth mindset is encouraged in staff, negative feedback is easier to receive because they have confidence in their ability to fix their performance problems. To achieve a growth mindset, feedback on performance needs to be delivered in the right way. Some suggestions from experts include the following^{8, 10, 11}:

- Keep it timely. Performance feedback on specific problems should occur in a timely way, so the problem or event is fresh in the staff member’s mind.
- Keep it private. Performance feedback, if negative, should be given in a secluded area where others can’t hear what is being said.
- Keep the focus positive. Performance feedback should address areas for improvement but also include what is going well.
- Keep it inclusive. Performance-feedback conversations should include the thoughts and ideas of the staff member concerning the issues discussed.
- Keep it factual. Performance feedback should be based on specific observations and facts, not on opinions, gossip, or generalizations about behavior.
- Keep it specific. Performance feedback should address only one or two distinct areas in which performance either was outstanding or needs improvement.
- Keep it goal oriented. Performance feedback should include goals for the way forward and when a follow-up conversation will take place.

USE AN EVIDENCE-BASED FEEDBACK APPROACH

Using an evidence-based framework for feedback conversations can help leaders stay on track with the feedback that they want to deliver and avoid the drama that sometimes accompanies negative behav-

ioral feedback. The Center for Creative Leadership has developed what it calls a situation–behavior–impact (SBI) model that is easy to remember and effective when used.¹² We can illustrate the model by using the following case scenario often faced by new managers:

Jackie Smith started in her nurse manager role one month ago in an ED. She notices that one of her nurses is repeatedly late for her shift. The previous manager ignored the behavior. Ms. Smith can see the impact that the nurse’s lateness has on the rest of the team and is determined to take action.

Without planning an intentional conversation, this discussion could quickly deteriorate. The nurse might tell the new manager that it has never been an issue before and she is not the only staff member who is late to work. This is avoided when the SBI framework is used to frame the discussion:

Situation. The situation needs to be described along with the details of what happened and when. Ms. Smith might say, “Last Monday, you were 25 minutes late for your shift.”

Behavior. The specific conduct about which feedback is given should be fact based and judgment free. Ms. Smith might say, “You didn’t notify the charge nurse that you would be late, and she reported to me that this was the second time this pay period that it has happened.”

Impact. The effect that the behavior had, whether positive or negative, is described. Ms. Smith might say, “It may not have been your intent, but this behavior is affecting the work of the team. The night charge nurse couldn’t leave on time. Both the patient report and rounding were delayed as an outcome of your lateness.”

Ms. Smith will want to seek the nurse’s reaction to what is said. It can be helpful when giving feedback to have some guiding questions to use in the conversation to gain clarification about the nurse’s viewpoint.¹⁰ Here are some examples of what you can ask:

- Is there more I need to know about this situation?
- How do you know your perceptions are accurate?
- What could you have done differently in this situation?
- How could you handle this situation differently in the future?
- How might we fix this?

The next phase of the conversation is a discussion about expectations. The manager would acknowledge the value that the nurse brings to the team but also convey that aspects of the professional behavior need

to change. She or he could then work with the nurse to establish a plan for moving forward that includes a plan for ongoing feedback. It will be important that when improvement is made, it is acknowledged and reinforced.

MANAGE CHALLENGING FEEDBACK SITUATIONS

It is easy to be a great nurse leader when things are going well and everyone is performing at her or his highest level. The real test for leaders is in how they manage poor performance or complex behavioral issues. Patrick Lencioni warns leaders that teams become dysfunctional when conflict is avoided or there is a lack of accountability among team members.¹³ These challenging conversations are sometimes labeled crucial discussions because there are opposing viewpoints, the stakes are high, and emotions are intense.¹⁴ Brené Brown writes about the need for leaders to have the courage to provide feedback in difficult situations. She reminds us that “clear is kind, unclear is unkind.”¹⁵ Learning to manage tough conversations is a vital nursing leadership skill.

Before you begin a crucial feedback situation, ask yourself what you want to see as an outcome and what is at stake.¹⁴ This allows you to begin with the right motives. The conversation that you will have if you want to help a staff member with performance or behavior is very different from one in which you plan to ask for a resignation or recommend a transfer. The SBI framework outlined above is an excellent way to stay on track regarding what you want to say. It is important not to let the conversation enter into a mode in which both parties become defensive and dialogue breaks down. Leaders should identify shared points of agreement, and avoid creating a dynamic in which there is an emotional reaction to the feedback that is given.

Performance-feedback conversations are not “one and done.” To successfully conclude the discussion, you need to come to a consensus about what will happen next. Document who will do what by when and agree to have a follow-up meeting at a specific time using whatever method is recommended by your human resources department. The feedback loop is an essential part of the process. Leaders must follow up on any goals that were set. Achievements can be reinforced and recognized. There may be a need to revise plans that do not work. If no progress is made, the next step could be to begin a disciplinary action process. The decision to act on feedback that has been given is a choice and not one that all staff make.¹⁶

The key to success in giving uncomfortable feedback is advance planning. You should know how the discussion will be conducted, who will be present, what you intend to say, and what you hope the

outcome will be. Writing down your key points can be helpful to keep you on track. New nurse leaders may find that a rehearsal with a seasoned colleague playing the part of a defensive staff member can be useful. Conversations about tough issues can be very challenging and sometimes personally painful. As leaders gain skill, these discussions become easier and help them grow as leaders.

REFLECT ON YOUR EXPERIENCES GIVING FEEDBACK

Not all feedback sessions will have the outcomes desired.¹¹

These situations can be very stressful. If not managed well, these interactions not only increase our stress levels but also

- rob us of our dignity because we may respond in a very reactive way.
- destroy our confidence in our leadership.
- destroy our morale and that of the team.
- foster negativity in the environment.
- decrease the productivity of the team.

Until we reflect on situations, looking honestly at our behavior and actions, we may not develop the insights that will help us behave differently in the future. The act of leadership reflection can help build our resiliency. It offers us the opportunity to consider changes we would make to how we deliver feedback instead of ruminating on the outcomes of our actions. The act of writing down your ideas can help to clarify your thinking. You will want to describe the conversations you have as factually and objectively as possible. You can then recall your reactions, your thoughts, and your feelings. Most significantly, you want to consider your responses to these discussions and reflect on any lessons you have learned from them:

- Do you see a pattern in your reactions?
- Do you easily become defensive when your leadership skills are questioned?
- Are there opportunities to further develop your emotional intelligence so future conversations might have a different outcome?

CONCLUSION

Work culture has been described as the invisible architecture of teams and in organizations.¹⁷ It is built on shared core values, attitudes, and behaviors. Cultures can be healthy and positive, but they can also become toxic if problems are not discussed through feedback. Becoming skilled in the art of giving both positive and negative feedback is crucial to being an effective leader. Like all skills, giving effective feedback takes practice and often courage. When it is done well with the right intentions, feedback can lead to remarkable changes in performance. ▼



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