

How to Give Better Feedback

To help learners in any area – mastering science, writing a paper or performing a dance – you need to give feedback that will help them reach their goals. Useful feedback is

- **Formative**
- **Actionable**
- **Clear**
- **Timely**
- **Supportive**

Let's take a look at each characteristic.

Formative. Adjusting our performance depends not only on receiving feedback, but also on having opportunities to use that feedback. The key is allowing learners sufficient time and opportunity to use the feedback to improve their performance and to help them achieve their long-term goals before any summative assessment appears on the scene. Without a chance to improve performance before a final assessment, students tend to disregard feedback and are less likely to apply it elsewhere when the course is over.

Feedback often functions as course corrections on a student's path. As you provide abundant feedback throughout the semester, keeping course learning goals in mind, students are best able to improve their own learning experience and to arrive successfully at the final destination.

Feedback shouldn't be limited to a grade against objectives recently taught; rather, useful feedback aligns with final performance standards students encounter early in a course.

Useful feedback contains concrete examples, at least much of the time. Remember that whatever feedback you share should be presented with long-term learning goals in mind and in a timely manner to allow learners a chance to improve performance.

Actionable. Actionable feedback will help answer the question, "What *specifically* should I do more or less of next time, based on this information?"

Too often feedback is given in haste and lacks concreteness and specificity. Comments such as "Good job!" or "This isn't quite right" or "B+" aren't helpful. Sometimes givers of feedback infer a situation based on their observations and simply offer a judgment, rather than present a sufficiently detailed description of the data.

Suppose you've been invited to offer feedback to a colleague on his or her teaching. A comment such as "Many students were bored in class" is a judgment and tells your colleague little about how to improve class engagement. More useful and less debatable is this: "I noted ongoing inattentive behavior in 15 of 28 students once lecturing began. Specific behaviors included texting, accessing Facebook and email, and conversing and laughing in low tones. However, after the collaborative group discussion began, I saw such behavior in only one student."

The latter comment provides feedback the teacher can use to adapt his or her teaching style and address specific issues.

Clear. While grading papers, performances and other works, ensure that the message you send on all levels is perfectly clear. Pay attention not only to verbal or written feedback, but also to the tone of your voice and the expression on your face. If learners don't understand your feedback, they won't know what they need to do in order to improve their performance.

Timely. To reach a destination, a pilot must undertake numerous and usually small course corrections. The sooner a correction is made, the better. The same principle applies as far as effective learning is concerned: The sooner feedback is given, the sooner it can be applied (assuming, of course, that you aren't hovering over students' shoulders, critiquing every word as it is written). Feedback is best given after the paper is submitted, the performance complete, the test taken, and so on. Hence, the best feedback is "timely," not necessarily "immediate."

Supportive. *How* you say something often matters as much as *what* you say. If you were to apply all the components of providing effective feedback but fail to be empathetic in your delivery, you likely would have as much success of your message getting through as you would shoving an extra-large pizza into a mail slot. When there is empathy, understanding and love, students are more likely to willingly receive the feedback you offer to help them succeed.

Remember: When giving feedback, get the FACTS straight. The best feedback is **F**ormative, **A**ctionable, **C**lear, **T**imely, and **S**upportive.

Resources

Fink, L. D. (2003). *Creating significant learning experiences: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wiggins, G. (2012). Seven keys to effective feedback. *Educational Leadership*, 70 (1), 10-16. Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept12/vol70/num01/Seven-Keys-to-Effective-Feedback.aspx>

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