

## **INTRODUCTION**

Feedback is one of those words that mean all sorts of things to all sorts of people. One example is that to the electronic engineer it is that awful noise when the microphone is brought too close to the amplification equipment and an ungodly sound comes from the speakers. Another example is a restaurant manager asks customers whether they were satisfied with their meal and the service they received. The professional trainer uses the term feedback to refer to information on performance. Trainers give feedback to trainees on their performance and receive feedback on their own performance as trainers.

The basis for learning is that we receive feedback on our performance. Some feedback can result from the task, as when we can operate equipment to achieve the desired result. If we fail then we know we have done something wrong. Other aspects of performance can be more subjective. If the consequences of errors are unacceptable, feedback provided to a learner can help them identify what they are doing right and what they must change to achieve the desired result. In essence feedback is formative rather than summative. Its purpose is to help the person receiving it to improve their performance.

As professionals in training, learning and development it is important that we understand feedback in the context of helping others to become:

- More effective in whatever they need or choose to do,
- Able to learn from the perceptions of others,
- Aware of the effects of their behaviour on others,
- Aware of the range of behaviours open to them in any situation.

## **A DEFINITION OF FEEDBACK**

There are many. Here's a 'home-grown' one.

*Feedback is information **offered** to an individual the purpose of which is to assist that person with their learning and development.*

## **When is it Most Powerful?**

Unquestionably it is when somebody seeks it. All learners need feedback but do not always welcome it, particularly when it draws attention to an error that has already been identified. Feedback that helps determine the cause of an error and the potential remedy can be very welcome when it is felt to be supportive rather than critical.

It is for this reason that the training team needs to consider the benefits of a '**Feedback Contract**' to the team. Feedback can help any group improve the way it functions and develops. It is important that **all** members of the team discuss and agree to establish a contract so all can benefit from the feedback of their colleagues. As a trainer you can take a lead in this and use powers of persuasion and example to encourage others through what might be, initially, quite a threatening concept. Initially, people will need time to value and then to learn and develop the skills of giving and receiving Feedback, which are not solely instinctive but have to be consciously developed.

Once people begin to experience the tangible benefits of the Feedback Contract, they may want to encourage the adoption of good quality feedback contracts throughout their organisation. This will help it to create what is known as the 'Learning Organisation' - one that can benefit equally from errors as from successes. Errors represent opportunities for developing better ways of doing things and successes because they are opportunities for building the vital self-esteem of all concerned.

## **Can Feedback Be Dangerous?**

Yes it can - both to the relationship between the giver and the receiver. If it is clumsily done or badly timed, or damaging to the self-esteem of the receiver. Also, if the giver acts or speaks insensitively and uses it as an opportunity to vent their irritation at some failure or other on the receiver. When it is badly received, it can also deter the giver from offering feedback in the future to the loss of opportunity to improve for both giver and receiver.

### **When Does it Help?**

When skilfully offered at an opportune moment because it provides the recipient with opportunities for benefiting from the perceptions of others. It also gives them the choice of modifying subsequent behaviour to improve their effectiveness. Experience shows that criteria have to be observed to foster receptiveness in the recipient.

### **KEY CRITERIA FOR GIVING QUALITY FEEDBACK**

- **What would the receiver like to focus on** - This is important right at the beginning because it identifies any immediate concern that the person has.
- **Positive** - Feedback needs to be positive. This skill needs to be developed by the giver since constructing long lists of what was negative is all too easy. This will make it virtually impossible for the receiver to do other than feeling inadequate, but feelings of inadequacy create weak foundations for development. Being positive does **not** mean that there is no improvement possible in the performance. What it does mean is when a recipient has explored all the positive perceptions, they themselves ask the question " Was there anything that I did that was not helpful?" ...And the door is open for the exploration of options for improvement.

An example might help. A presenter has been talking to an audience but for 95% of the time has been staring out of the window rather than looking at the audience.

This can be turned into a positive..." I found it much more interesting and helpful when you looked at me because I felt more involved in what you were explaining".

- **Support** - Anyone who becomes the focus of attention having just completed a task or presentation or interview is likely to be feeling vulnerable. Givers of Feedback therefore need to be perceived as encouraging and supportive rather than critical and aggressive.
- **Timely** - The timing needs to be right for the receiver but as close to the event as is possible for them. People differ; some want to get away from the event for a while before being in a receptive mood while others prefer to take the opportunity straight away. Giving feedback when the recipient is unable to listen to it is a wasted opportunity.
- **Specific** - "That was jolly good" is nice to hear but, after a while, it leaves the receiver wondering what was good. Only when they can hear **what** made it good do they have something to work on for the future.
- **Behaviour that can be changed** - Feedback has to identify behaviours that the receiver can change if they so wish.
- **The behaviour, not the person** - The behaviours are the issue, not the person; not what they are but what they did.
- **Non-judgemental** - Avoid 'you' messages. Better to stick with the 'I' messages; e.g. " I liked the use of the OHP because it helped me to understand the point about x, y and z". This is easier to accept than "You were right to use the OHP for x, y and z".

- **A personal reaction** - From the above example you are clearly only offering your perception. Others may differ in their feedback yet they will have equal validity for the recipient.
- **Leave the self-esteem intact** – The receiver should still feel valued as a person after being given feedback. If they don't then they quickly stop listening and become angry, making any feedback valueless.
- **The receiver is free to change** - The feedback receiver chooses to change based on feedback accepted rather than feeling forced to change. They need to OWN the potential change

## RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Accepting that Feedback is to help the recipients to develop their skills, then it follows that we should encourage and welcome it.

- **Positive** - Make it clear to the giver that you appreciate their Feedback. Thank them.
- **Highlight your areas of concern** – Ask for specific feedback on areas of your performance about which you are concerned. Perhaps because you are unsure how well something worked or because you had tried to improve in one area.
- **Points to note** - Ask if there are any other aspects on which they can comment.
- **Check your understanding** - Make sure that you understand the feedback and don't be shy of asking for more depth regarding any point. Ask for clarification if you need it or are not too sure exactly what the giver is driving at.
- **Alternatives** - Either offer your own or ask them if they have any suggestions as to different ways of tackling the issue.
- **Ask if anything was unhelpful** - Ask this when you have explored all the other aspects if you want to encourage them to tell you of anything that they would suggest might have been done differently.
- **Avoid defensiveness** - Being defensive is a sure way to stop people from offering you their perceptions.
- **Reward the feedback giver** - One way of doing this is to indicate maybe one or two things that you will try out next time in the light of their helpful observations.