

Robinsons on Parallel Giving and Receiving Feedback

It has been said that “constructive criticism is an oxymoron.” Giving that some thought one understands that criticism in its usual negative form gets emotionally blocked before the brain has a chance to accept and process it. Our defense mechanisms kick in, and we tend to reject and discount criticism.

At the International Adlerian School in Switzerland in the Group Dynamics course taught by Karen John, Ph. D., we learned about giving and receiving feedback—valuable information that each of us can take to heart.

Constructive feedback as opposed to constructive criticism helps us learn more about how we affect others by our words and deeds. It provides information that offers us options and encourages personal development. Therefore it is of value to learn how to give and receive it. If we learn to provide feedback with skill and kindness, negative feedback can be equally important and useful.

Destructive feedback is given in an unskilled way and leaves the listener with negative feelings and no idea of how to use or build on what has been said.

This is a pattern for feedback to others: “Here’s what I liked about what you did and why. You could have done this differently.”

This is a pattern for feedback to yourself: “Here’s what I liked about what I did and why, and what I could have done differently.”

Tips for giving feedback

1. Be balanced and honest. We all need to be told that we are doing well. Our culture seems to emphasize weaknesses rather than strengths. Some of us actually believe that human beings thrive on hearing MORE about their strengths than their weaknesses.
2. Be specific, concrete and descriptive. General comments such as “That was brilliant,” or “That was awful,” are not as helpful as telling the person exactly what was helpful. This provides a basis for learning, changing, and moving a new direction. For example, “I liked the way you turned and faced the speaker. That showed you really were listening and focused.”
3. Refer to the behavior. It is not useful (or fair) to give feedback on things over which the person has no choice or control. It is best to focus comments on behavior that can be changed. The use of the word “could” versus “should” also is helpful, and you can see why.

4. Offer alternatives, if invited. If a person has heard the feedback before, it may not be clear what else can be done. It maybe helpful to suggest an alternative as part of your feedback.
5. Leave the recipient with a choice. It is not our role as peers and team members to demand change. When giving feedback, our job is to offer information that can help others understand themselves better. This doesn't mean that they will change or even want to change.
6. What does this feedback say about ME? The feedback you provide to others will often say as much about you as it does about the person you are giving it to. What we choose to focus on reflects our values, beliefs and preoccupations. We can therefore learn about ourselves while helping others to learn about themselves.

Tips for receiving feedback

1. Listen to the feedback. It is tempting to reject or argue with what is being said before hearing all that a person has to say or before processing what has been said. While feedback can be difficult to hear, it is a good way to learn about how we are perceived. It is well worth listening carefully, and perhaps thinking carefully before responding.
2. Be clear about what you think you are hearing. Clarify what you have heard and figure out that you have not jumped to conclusions. It is useful to repeat what you think you heard to check that you have it right.
3. Check with others. The feedback you receive is from one person or a group of people. It can be useful to check with others to see if your understanding is shared.
4. Ask for the feedback you want. If the feedback you want has not been offered, you have a right to ask for the feedback you seek, just as others have the right to give it.
5. Decide what to do. Once you have heard and cleared up what has been said, you have checked with others, and asked for the feedback you want, you are in a position to choose what you will do with the information. You can decide to change your thinking and behavior, to ignore the feedback, or to think about it for a while.
6. Thank the person. It can be as difficult to give feedback, as it is to receive it. It helps relationships to acknowledge and thank the giver.

Some of us dislike criticism so much that we live our lives as best we can to avoid it. Others of us are less dependent on what others think and behave without regard to what others think or say. Some of us give no thought at all to behaviors and actions until they get us into trouble. Wherever we are in this life, we are in a position of impacting others in a positive or negative way. Feedback will come our way, what we will do with it is up to us.