

dear residents

Giving and Receiving Feedback

August 14, 2022

Dear Residents,

By now, I expect that you have received feedback and have given some to others. Both are exceptionally difficult to do. Giving feedback is hard, because one is uncertain whether it will be received well even if it is intended to help the other person improve. Often, we default to limiting our feedback to affirmation only, losing the opportunity to help others improve. Receiving feedback can dent our sense of self-worth and worsen our self-confidence and performance. As Marcus Buckingham states so eloquently, *“Aside from input about facts or required steps, feedback generally consists of one person—however well-intentioned—smothering another.”*

Much has been written about feedback and the recommendations are all over the place. For years, the “feedback sandwich” was the preferred method to make tough feedback go down smoothly. In this technique, you sandwich the negative feedback between two pieces of positive feedback. The trouble here is what you are really saying is that you’ll start with some affirmation to create receptiveness for the “meat” of the message – aka, the negative hard-to-swallow information, and then lessen the blow with a positive follow up affirmation. The result is that while this technique is less anxiety provoking for the person giving the feedback, it often leads to the receiver simply remembering the “praise” and ignoring the “constructive” (negative) feedback.

There are 3 types of feedback

- Appreciation – motivates and encourages
- Coaching – helps increase knowledge and skills
- Evaluation – tells you where you stand and aligns expectations

Of these, evaluation is fraught with the biggest problems. Evaluations create 3 triggers that block feedback:

Truth: that’s wrong, that’s not helpful, that’s not me.

Relationship: after all I’ve done for you? Who are you to say? You’re the problem, not me.

Identity: I screw up everything, I’m doomed, I’m not a bad person – or am I?

It turns out that giving feedback is not the side of the feedback equation we should be focusing on – it ought to be on the receiving side of feedback. This is the main theme of the book [Thanks for the](#)

[Feedback](#) by Stone and Heen. They state that “*we know that feedback is essential for professional development and healthy relationships—but we dread it and often dismiss it. That’s because receiving feedback sits at the junction of two conflicting human desires. We want to learn and grow, but we also want to be accepted and respected just as we are now.*”

In a very popular article, [The Feedback Fallacy](#), Buckingham and Goodall debunk three beliefs that hold the theory of feedback together.

Feedback Beliefs	Why These are Wrong
Others are more aware of your weaknesses than you are	Humans are unreliable raters of other humans
Your colleagues can teach you what you don’t know***	Learning is less a function of adding something that isn’t there than it is of recognizing, reinforcing, and refining what already is
Great performance is universal, describable, analyzable, and transferable.	Excellence in any endeavor is almost impossible to define, and yet getting there, for each of us, is relatively easy.

****This does not apply to coaching – how to start an IV, how to use Epic, providing factual knowledge, etc. Coaching-based feedback is accordingly very useful.*

The authors do worry that in the quest to give people rigorous feedback to improve performance, we are missing an important question: “*How can we help each person thrive and excel?*”

Excellence is an outcome – it may be buried in our plentiful activities of daily work – but when it is evident to you, draw attention to it. Highlighting a positive pattern that’s already there will help reinforce it.

Describe what you noticed and how it made you feel.

If you hear “good job” – ask what part of it was good. This is often all an attending will write on your rotation evaluation – you have my permission to send them an email asking for clarification and specifics.

Be mindful of interruptions – we are tempted to immediately stop a problem from getting worse. This can actually inhibit learning. Of course, if the NG tube is headed to the right bronchus, by all means, yell – but in most other situations you get more purchase when dissecting what went right – “rest and digest.”

The Right Way to Help Colleagues Excel

If you want to get into the excellence business, here are some examples of language to try.

Instead of	Try
Can I give you some feedback?	Here's my reaction.
Good job!	Here are three things that really worked for me. What was going through your mind when you did them?
Here's what you should do.	Here's what I would do.
Here's where you need to improve.	Here's what worked best for me, and here's why.
That didn't really work.	When you did x, I felt y or I didn't get that.
You need to improve your communication skills.	Here's exactly where you started to lose me.
You need to be more responsive.	When I don't hear from you, I worry that we're not on the same page.
You lack strategic thinking.	I'm struggling to understand your plan.
You should do x [in response to a request for advice].	What do you feel you're struggling with, and what have you done in the past that's worked in a similar situation?

HBR

In residency training you will get a lot of feedback from your colleagues and from the faculty. You will also receive structured feedback regarding your progress along the six core competencies (patient care, medical knowledge, communication, professionalism, self-improvement, and system knowledge). Think of these six items as longitudinal “coaching feedback.” A distinction is made between “formative feedback” during an assignment (where you have the opportunity to improve) vs. “summative feedback” (which is akin to a final grade for your performance).

There is a concluding section in your evaluation form which rates your overall performance. This is a narrative section with observations, overall assessment, and helpful advice on how to excel. Not all faculty do this piece well and it is my job to help them get better at this. Again, you have my permission to contact these faculty members for clarification when desired.

You will also be providing a lot of feedback. The feedback you deliver to your peers is not confidential or anonymous. When it was confidential/anonymous, it caused more harm than good (accordingly we changed that setting). Feedback you provide to your faculty is both anonymous and confidential. These evaluations are released to your faculty in aggregate and after a delay, and you can never be identified. As you can imagine, this is not very helpful for the faculty in improving their performance, but it remains an ACGME rule.

Our evaluation forms are probably too long. We hope to redesign these soon and substantially shorten them. Deloitte, a company with over 250,000 employees, uses just 4 questions in their evaluation forms:

1. Given what I know of this person's performance, and if it were my money, I would award this person the highest possible compensation increase and bonus. [1-5]
2. Given what I know of this person's performance, I would always want him or her on my team. [1-5]
3. This person is at risk for low performance. [Yes or No]
4. This person is ready for promotion today. [Yes or No]

I expect that much of what I have written this week is clear as mud. Here is what I want to leave you with. The most important thing you can do is to solicit feedback and be receptive to it. The second most important thing that you can do is to identify what others are doing well, so that they can excel along their own trajectory.

Eager for your feedback,

Dino Kazi